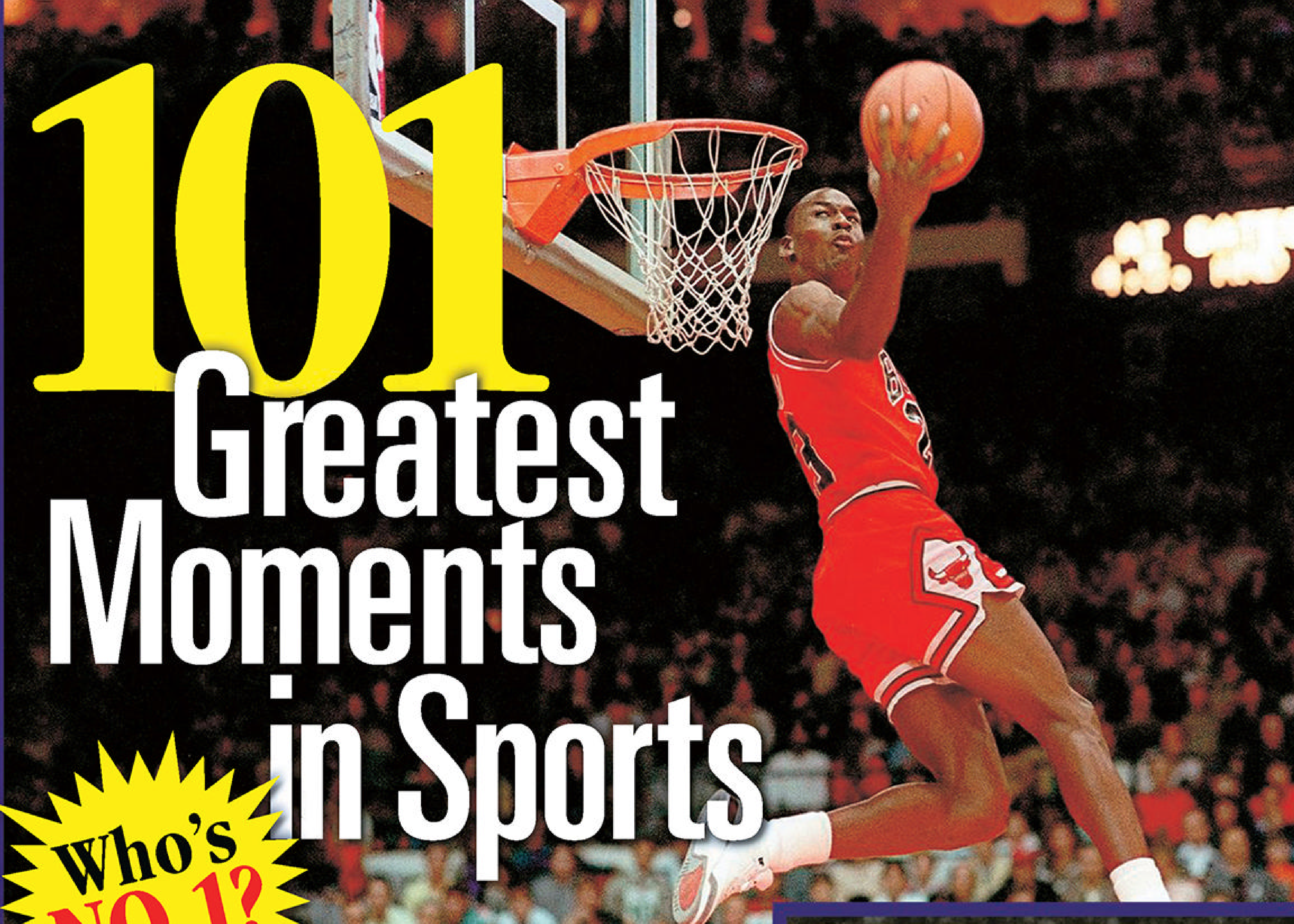
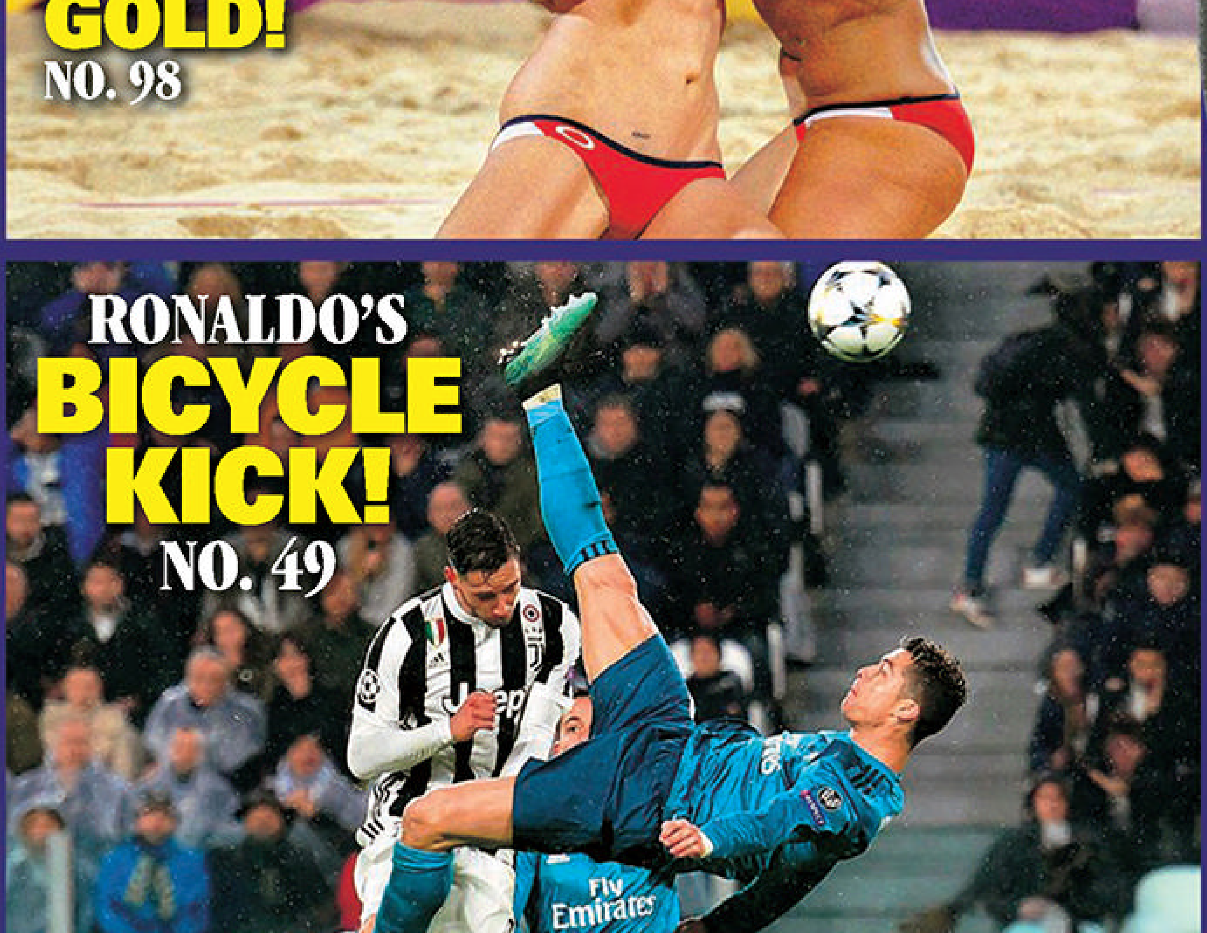


101 Greatest Moments in Sports

Who's NO. 1?

MISTY & KERRI
WIN OLYMPIC GOLD!
NO. 98



RONALDO'S
BICYCLE KICK!
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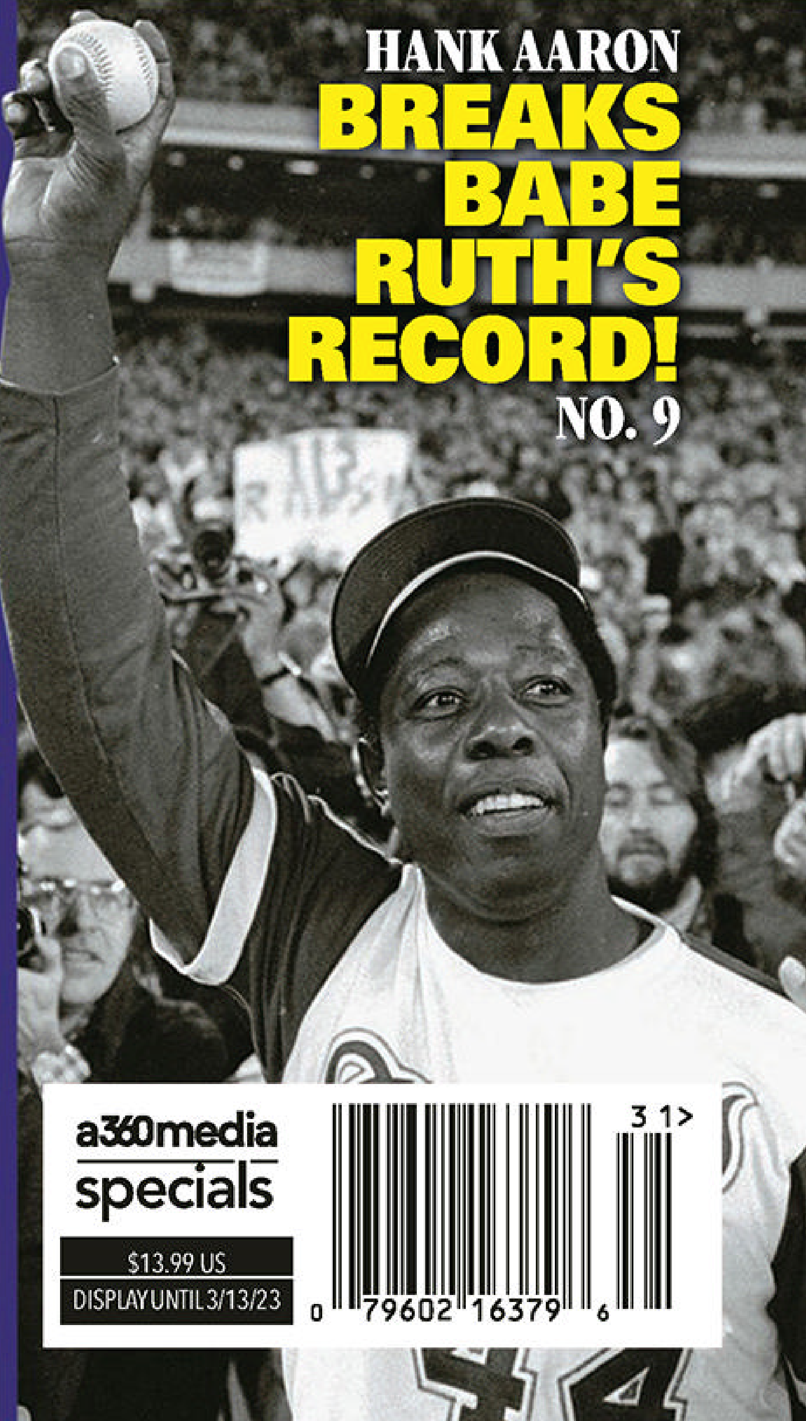

HANK AARON
BREAKS BABE RUTH'S RECORD!
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101 GREATEST MOMENTS IN SPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

Jamaica
TDK
Bolt
berlin 2009
TDK
Spearmon
berlin
USA
VTB

Attention, fellow sports fanatics—here's something you'll learn even quicker than Usain Bolt (see #11), more heartbreakingly than a Protopopovs death spiral (#81) and as acutely as a Randy Couture left to the jaw (#65) when compiling something as instantly debatable as *The 101 Greatest Moments in Sports*: 101 is a very tiny number.

So let's call out the elephant right here and now. There are a *few* moments we missed, or nearly did. They include the following three, but likely three hundred others—give or take a few thousand:

"You might want to have another look at that Jimmy Connors U.S. Open run in 1991," a friend mentioned (with some restraint) when weighing in on an earlier draft of this list—which ran deep into the 140s.

"You're not including water polo?" said a colleague, kind of incredulous, before making us promise to watch the 2006 Hungarian documentary *Freedom's Fury*, about a bloody 1956 battle (in a pool) with the Soviets.

"Sumo wrestling needs to be in here," we were also told. "It's the most exciting live sporting event you'll ever see." It's in there (#80).

Guaranteed there will be feelings of all kinds when visiting or revisiting these moments. Like an old John Wooden quote, sports will tap into deeper things. And, like a young Marty McSorley body check, they tend to flatten you unexpectedly at times. You may find it challenging, for example, to read that quote from coach Shannon Miller of Canada's Women's Olympic Hockey Team (#79) without getting verklempt. Same goes for Hank Aaron's kind words (#9) to that poor Dodgers pitcher who tossed him his 715th homer.

The stats and the final scores—sure, they're important. Any Cammi Granato, Mike Eruzione or Francois Pienaar can tell you that. But the greatest moments in sports can transport us beyond the buzzer, anchor into the bigger picture and achieve even greater things.

"Sport has the power to change the world," said Nelson Mandela, who knew something on the subject. "It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does."

But back to those missing moments. Jimmy Connors furiously called the chair umpire "a bum" right to his face after a dicey call on a crucial point during the '91 U.S. Open—before shaking the guy's hand at the end of an unforgettable match worthy of inclusion here. With apologies to Jimmy, we fully anticipate that same team spirit from you when flipping from #101 to numero uno. Mainly, enjoy the game.

– Jordan Rane

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BABE CALLS THE SHOT— OR NOT

OCT. 1, 1932—CHICAGO, IL

George Herman Ruth. The Bambino. The Sultan of Swat. The finest lefty pitcher of the 1910s (you may have forgotten)—with nine shutouts in 1916 alone. The heaviest, steroid-free hitter ever, if you leave Ted Williams, Hank Aaron and a couple others out of the debate. The most active philanderer in professional sports (stats unavailable). And, yes, the legend behind baseball's most famous and famously debated home run.

How can we dare begin our countdown of the 101 Greatest Moments in Sports with the great Babe Ruth slotted in 101st?

Two reasons. One—it's Babe Ruth. He needs to be perched at the very top of these pages, even if it's technically the bottom. Two—the most mythical, eternally debated moment in his peerless career may be just that. A total crock. Or true.

In the fifth inning of Game 3 during the '32 World Series against the Cubs with the score tied 4–4 and a relentless crowd of hecklers riding him at Chicago's Wrigley Field, Ruth makes some sort of pointing gesture—with his bat, with his hand, toward the center field fence, or elsewhere. On the next pitch, he pounds a Charlie Root curveball 490 feet out of the park. The homer, his second of the game, is incontestable. The question is, did he presciently point it out first?

Did Babe Ruth call the shot? It depends on who you ask.

After the game, Ruth himself will initially make no references to any called shot, nor does anyone else. It's only after local sportswriter Joe Williams' reference to it in a poetic headline in the *New York World-Telegram*—"Ruth Calls Shot as He Puts Homer No. 2 in Side Pocket"—that the whole mythical ball gets rolling. Hard and fast.

Ruth will flamboyantly latch on, talking a blue streak about his called shot with increasing fervor over the years. His loyal friend and teammate Lou Gehrig affirms it happened too. So will John Paul Stevens in a (much) later interview with *The New Yorker*. "We were sitting behind third base, not too far back," the Supreme Court Justice avows, a mere 78 years after attending the game with his dad as a kid. "Ruth did point to the center field scoreboard. It really happened."

"If he'd pointed to the bleachers, I'd be the first to say so," counters Cubs catcher Gabby Hartnett—the closest one to Ruth at home plate, and a vehement denier of any so-called called shot. Nine years later, pitcher Charlie Root will catch up with Ruth on a movie set for *The Pride of the Yankees*, as later related by baseball historian Donald Honig from a firsthand witness who allegedly overhears this exchange:

"You never pointed out to center field before you hit that ball off me, did you?" Root purportedly asks Ruth, point blank.

"I know I didn't," says Ruth. "But it made a hell of a story, didn't it?"

Anyway, you didn't hear it from us. Your call.

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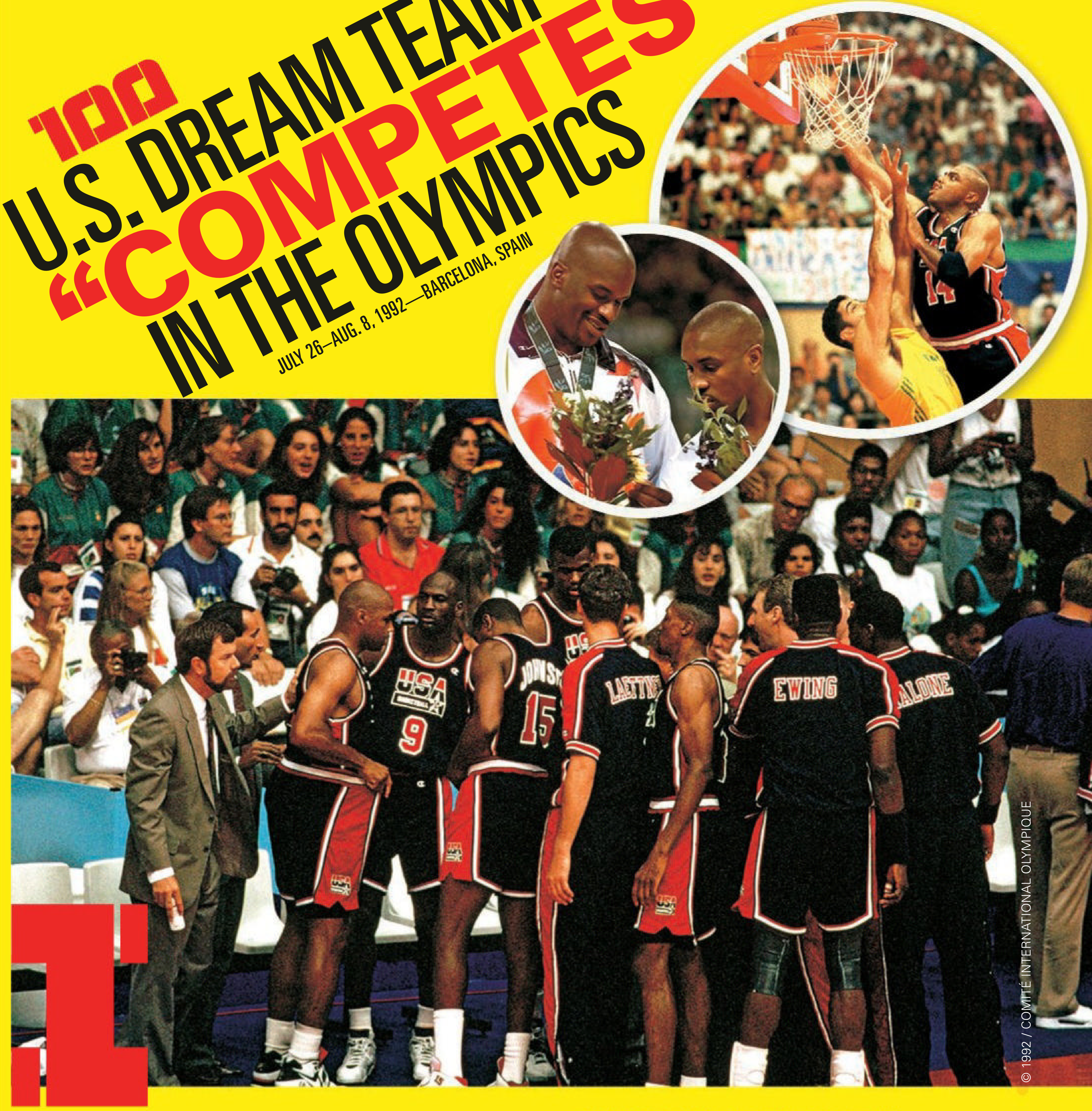
U.S. DREAM TEAM “COMPETES” IN THE OLYMPICS

JULY 26–AUG. 8, 1992—BARCELONA, SPAIN


© 1992 / COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIQUE

“I don’t know anything about Angola, but Angola’s in trouble,” quips Charles Barkley, when asked at a press conference about his team’s upcoming first-round challenger in the ’92 Barcelona Summer Olympics.

On July 26, Olympic basketball’s U.S. “Dream Team” then makes good on Barkley’s prophecy, beating Angola 116–48—before trouncing every other team in their predestined path to Olympic podium glory.

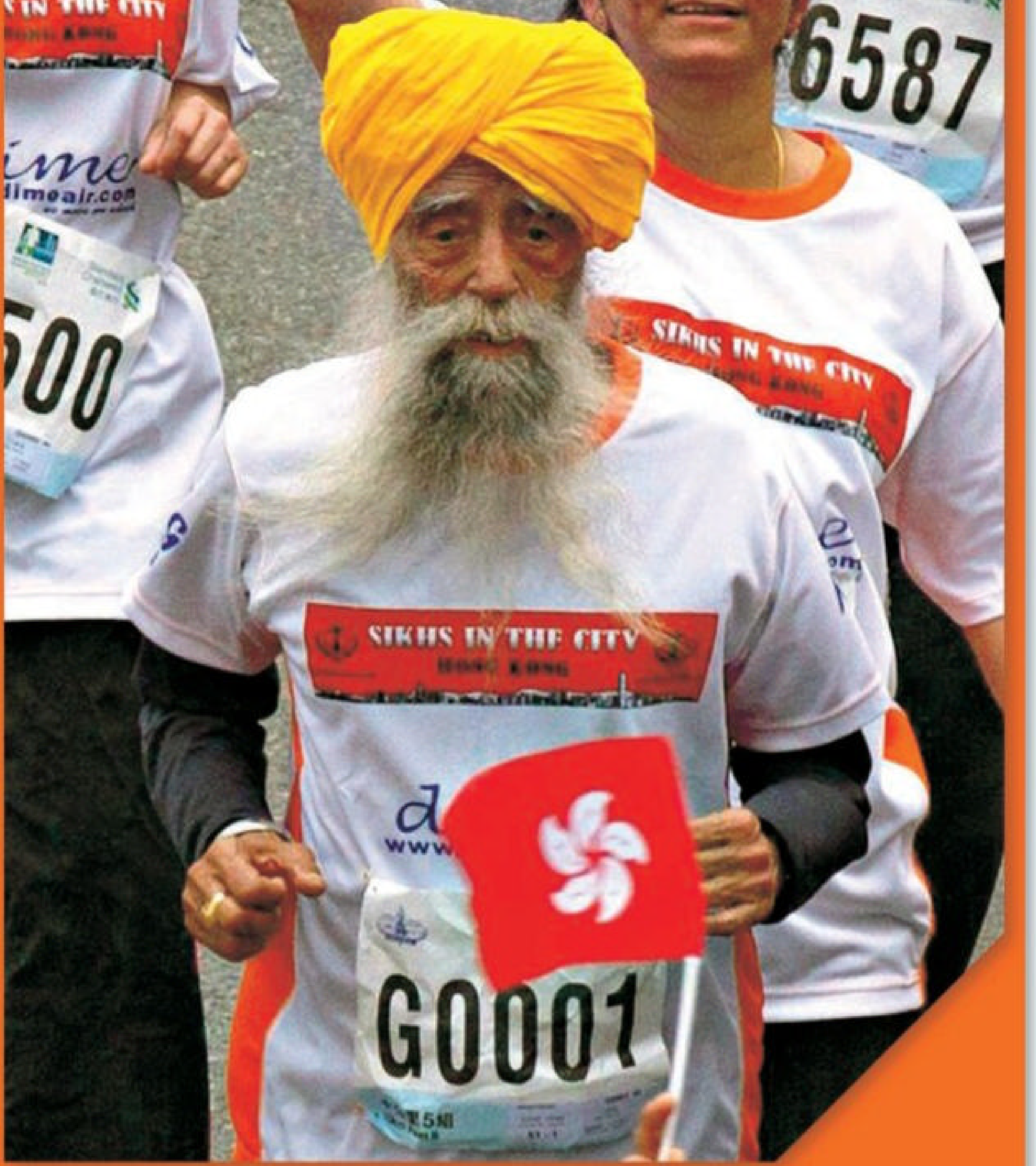
Basketball’s most terrifying starting five ever—Barkley, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Patrick Ewing and Karl Malone—lead the dozen-member Dream Team to score 46 unanswered points against Angola—save for a single free throw sunk by Angolan forward Herlander Coimbra after receiving a hard elbow to the chest from Barkley.

After the game, Coimbra will describe his American opponents as being “on a galaxy far, far away.”

Stacked with active NBA players for the first time, after the International Basketball Federation relaxes its pro eligibility rules in 1989, the 1992 U.S. Men’s Olympic basketball team will be pre-regarded as the greatest sports team ever assembled before playing a single game. As expected, their “run” for the gold is less serious competition than superstar spectacle, both on and off the court.

Too famous to be camped out at the Olympic Village (and too big for the beds), the team’s dozen celebrity athletes are fortressed at a luxury hotel off-site. Fans mob them wherever they go. Opponents are often keener to get photos with Dream Team players than to ostensibly compete against them.

During six blowouts, concluding with a 117–85 finals victory against Croatia, the Dream Team defeats its opponents by an average of nearly 44 points per game before securing the gold. Eventually, the team will be inducted into three separate sports Halls of Fame.



Centenarian Crosses the Finish Line

OCT. 16, 2011—TORONTO, CANADA

By his own admission, Fauja Singh was a late bloomer.

Born in the Punjab region of British India on April 1, 1911, according to a British passport (birth records were scarce in India at the time), the future Londoner didn't walk until he was 5 years old. As a frail kid growing up in Jalandhar, he'd be teased by his peers—who nicknamed him "stick."

A tortoise-and-hare turn of events will lead Singh to become the world's fastest and most prolific runner for his advanced age bracket after moving to London and taking up the sport in his late '80s—mainly to get out of the house.

"Most elderly people in Britain eat a rich diet, don't move about and only travel in cars—and that makes them sick," Singh tells *The Indian Express* in 2004. "I'd never thought of running a marathon, but slowly the idea grew."

Completing his first—the 2000 London Marathon—at age 89, Singh runs several more of them through his 90s, shattering records (most of them his own former ones) along the way. At 93, he runs 26.2 miles in six hours and 54 minutes, shaving nearly an hour off the previous best time in the sparsely populated nonagenarian bracket.

Singh then ups this feat in 2011 at the Toronto Waterfront Marathon, where he becomes the first 100-year-old to complete a marathon. The race takes him a little over eight hours.

A few days before the main event, Singh also notches eight additional centenarian running records at a stadium track—ranging from the 100-meter dash (23.14 seconds) to 5,000 meters (49:57.39). While *Guinness World Records* declines to record Singh's feats without an actual birth certificate, the runner more importantly receives a validating congratulatory letter from Queen Elizabeth on his 100th birthday.

"The first 20 miles are not difficult," an unfazed Singh says about completing a marathon at his age. "As for the last six miles, I run while talking to God."

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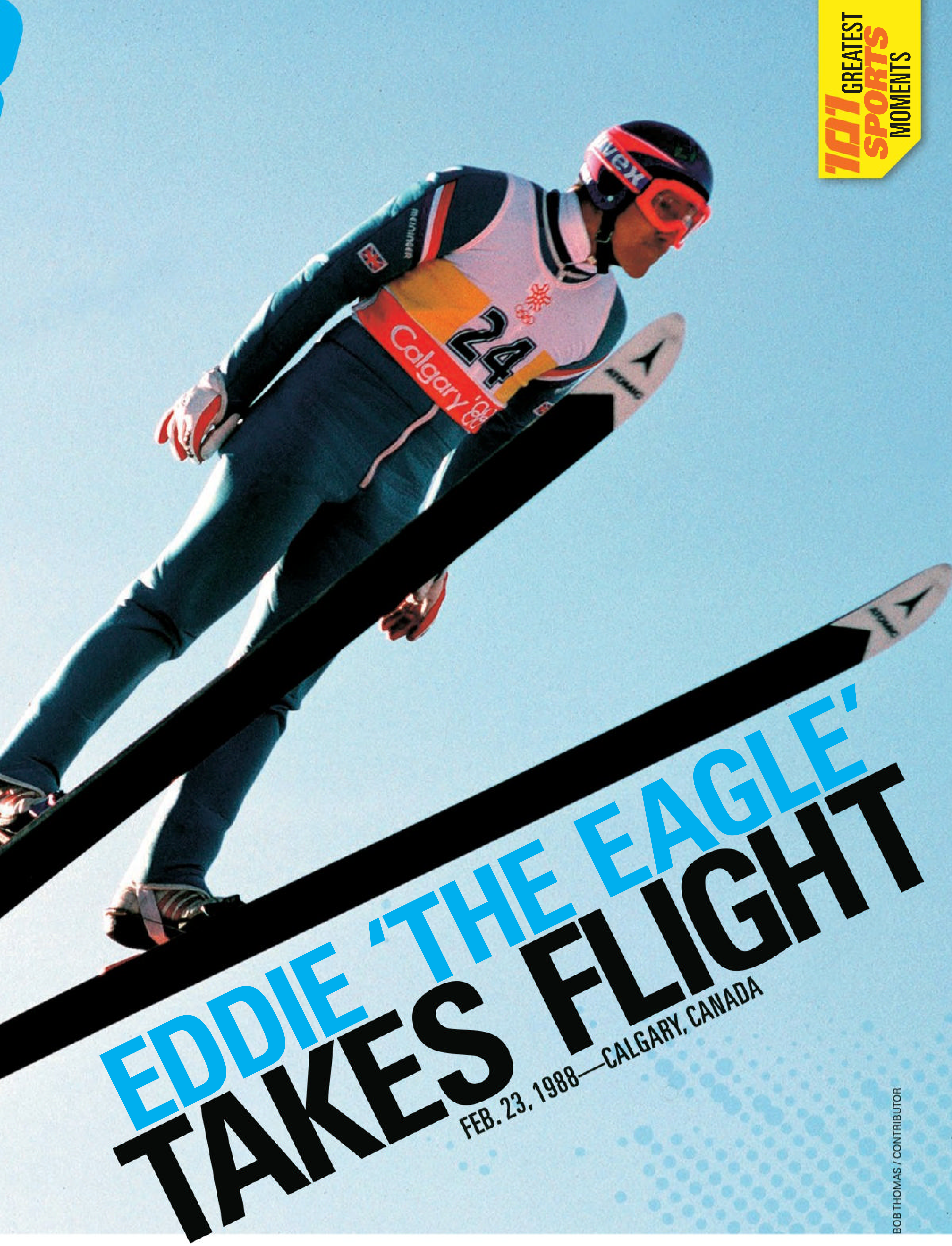
For proof that athletic triumph can be launched from the most far-fetched dreams, look no further than Eddie "the Eagle" Edwards. The 24-year-old English day laborer easily qualifies as the least likely Winter Olympian in history when he enters the 1988 Calgary Games as the U.K.'s first-ever one-man ski jumping team.

Having taught himself on $60 boards, a helmet fastened with string and oversize boots that require six pairs of socks, Edwards is greeted in Calgary by surprise fans, a new nickname and all the media attention a spectacled plasterer from the Cotswolds with inexplicable and unwavering ski-jumping aspirations should expect.

"I'd like to say I fly like an eagle, but I'm probably closer to the ostrich," says Edwards, winning the unofficial gold in endearing himself to everyone.

But mainly the Eagle has come to fly. And fly he does. Eddie Edwards' longest jump, 73.5 meters, of several successful launches is an instant British record that puts him in 55th place. Dead last. But at the Olympics—a triumph of its own.

Setting his sights on competing in the next Winter Games, Edwards will be thwarted by the International Olympic Committee's new stringent qualification requirements—nicknamed the "Eddie the Eagle rule"—making it nearly impossible for Eddie Edwards–style amateurs to ever qualify again for the Olympics. Undeterred, Edwards continues training, improving and failing to make it into three subsequent Olympics over the next decade—before inspiring a feel-good Hollywood biopic that launches a new generation of Eddie "the Eagle" fans.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Calgary '88
ATOMIC
ATOMIC

EDDIE 'THE EAGLE' TAKES FLIGHT

FEB. 23, 1988—CALGARY, CANADA

BOB THOMAS / CONTRIBUTOR

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Jamaica Goes

As the real story goes (not the wildly Hollywoodized version), one of the most anomalous Olympic success stories is inspired by a chance conversation in 1987 between a Jamaican diplomat and a military officer. Taking pride in their country's consistent success in the Summer Olympic Games dating back to 1948, the two men determine—and here's where it gets foggier—that there's no reason Jamaican athletes shouldn't thrive in a Winter Olympic sport too.

Having recently attended an annual pushcart derby in the Jamaican Blue Mountains, the diplomat, George Fitch, suggests that this sport would naturally be bobsledding.

Cut to just one year later at the '88 Winter Olympic Games: The first-ever men's Jamaican bobsledding competitors—recruited from the Jamaica Defense Force—are now armed in bobsledding helmets and green-and-yellow one-piecers for their maiden voyage on an icy 1,400-meter track at Calgary's Olympic Park.

Jamaica's two-man crew, run by pilot Dudley Stokes and brakeman Michael White, beat 11 other teams—including competitors from New Zealand, Japan and the United States—in their inaugural Olympic run, taking 30th place overall. The team's four-man run crashes on a sharp turn, but not before inspiring Jamaican bobsledding in subsequent Olympics. It will also inspire the 1993 movie *Cool Runnings*—one of the most commercially successful and loosely adapted sports comedies in history.

"What is fact is the crash, and everything else is fiction," says Fitch about the movie in an ESPN interview. "This 'feel the rhythm, feel the rhyme, it's Jamaica bobsled time'—that's strictly Hollywood."

BILLIE JEAN KING BEATS BOBBY RIGGS

SEPT. 20, 1973—HOUSTON, TX

Billie Jean King, the No. 2 female tennis player in the world in 1973, initially has no intention of stooping to play a media-baited tennis match against former men's champion, outspoken sexist and shameless self-promoter Bobby Riggs. At age 55, Riggs claims he can handily beat any woman on the court, repeatedly challenging the best female tennis players as brashly and publicly as possible.

When No. 1-ranked Margaret Court takes him on—and then loses to a smug Riggs in a CBS-televised match on the second Sunday of May (dubbed the "Mother's Day Massacre"), Riggs extends yet another challenge to 29-year-old King, who this time accepts.

"When Margaret lost, I immediately thought, 'Now I'm gonna have to play him,'" King recalls in a *SportsWire* interview nearly 50 years after her historic "Battle of the Sexes" match against Riggs in front of more than 30,000 fans at the Houston Astrodome and 90 million viewers worldwide—still one of the most widely watched sporting events ever. "I had to turn people's thoughts around about us."

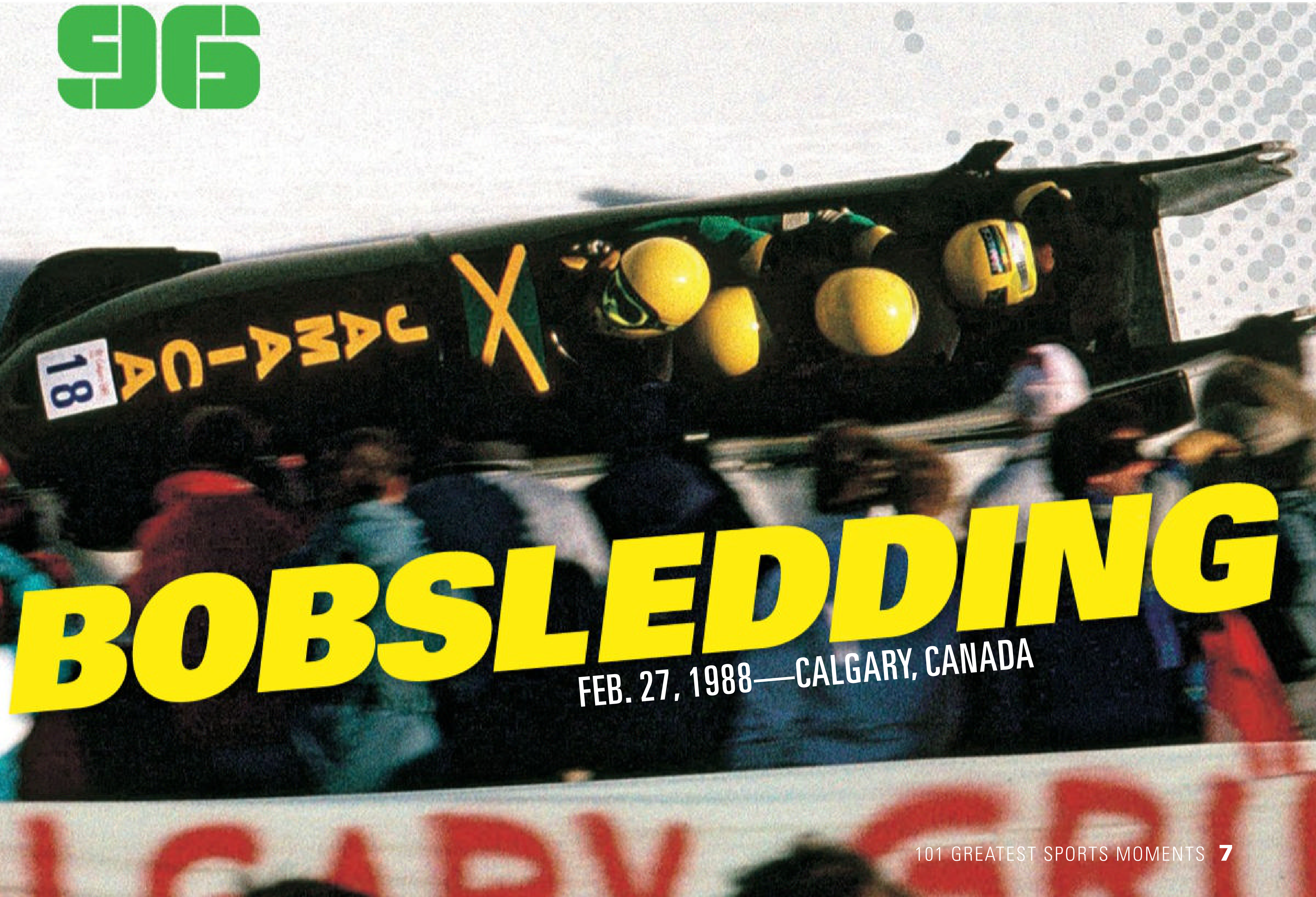
The media circus leading up to the match features Riggs jabbering away as usual ("She's a woman. They don't have the emotional stability to win.") contrasted with a poised, earnest King ("I'm taking this match very seriously. Bobby had better be ready.") shouldering enormous stakes far beyond her opponent's clown act.

"I thought it would set us back 50 years if I didn't win that match," King later says. "It would ruin the women's [tennis] tour and affect all women's self-esteem. To beat a 55-year-old guy was no thrill for me. The thrill was exposing a lot of new people to tennis."

During the match, King adjusts her usual aggressive game to meet Riggs' series of maddening lobs and spin balls. Sticking to endless baseline rallies, King strategically runs her ill-prepared, out-of-shape opponent all over the court. When a desperate Riggs then feebly tries to up the pace, King shifts into high gear and swiftly overpowers him in straight sets.

Famously tossing her racket into the air after the final point in real and symbolic victory, King receives an extended standing ovation from the crowd and a few conciliatory words from her humbled opponent. Climbing over the net to meet King on her side of the court, Riggs extends his arm and tells her what she already knows: "I underestimated you."

BOTTOM: © 1988 / COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIQUE (CIO) / MAEDER, JEAN-PAUL



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BOBSLEDDING

FEB. 27, 1988—CALGARY, CANADA

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JAPAN OUT-TRIES SOUTH AFRICA

SEPT. 19, 2015—BRIGHTON, ENGLAND

Given 80–1 odds (bookies were going with 500–1) against the two-time champion South Africa Springboks, Japan's Cherry Blossoms enter round one of the 2015 Rugby World Cup on a 24-year (not a typo) losing streak in international competition. The record includes a devastating 145–17 drubbing by New Zealand's All Blacks in 1995.

A rebuilt team led by Aussie-Japanese coach Eddie Jones then stages the single greatest upset in international rugby union history.

Holding South Africa to a narrow lead at halftime, the Blossoms tie it up later in the game before falling back by just three points in the final minutes. Japan's decision to decline a draw with a field goal and instead go for the win with a try has been hailed by many as the boldest move in the history of the World Cup.

They get the win—on a dramatic diving try from winger Karne Hesketh.

Japan's 34–32 victory over the Springboks prompts open weeping from joyous spectators, a wave of national pride and absolutely stunned Springbok fans lining up to applaud Japan's players back onto their team bus after the game.

"It was David versus Goliath, but we've been training for this day for the last four years," Japan's team captain Michael Leitch tells reporters after the game. "I know the whole world is surprised, but in our camp we knew we could do it."

Before bowing out of the tournament, Japan goes on to defeat two more teams. During the next World Cup, in 2019, Japan makes it to the quarter finals for the first time ever. A movie entitled *The Brighton Miracle* is released that same year, inspired by their seminal victory over the Springboks.

RUGBY
2015
22

LEFT: KYODO NEWS / CONTRIBUTOR RIGHT: HEINZ KLUETMEIER / CONTRIBUTOR

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Horse Racing Affirms Its GREATEST RIVALRY

JUNE 10, 1978—
ELMONT, NY

Excitement leading up to 1978's 110th running of the Belmont Stakes is twofold. First, there's the very real chance that Affirmed—the year's highest-flying thoroughbred—can pull off horse racing's first Triple Crown in, well … a year. Seattle Slew just did it in 1977.

The even bigger story this time around involves another horse, Alydar, who'd narrowly come in second at both preceding Triple Crown races—losing to Affirmed by one and a half lengths at the Kentucky Derby and then by a neck at the Preakness Stakes. Those two events (of the eight the pair of horses have run against each other in just under a year) turn Affirmed and Alydar into thoroughbred racing's greatest rivalry—and the Belmont Stakes into the rematch of the century.

Kicking away from the pack early, Affirmed and Alydar deliver accordingly, with the most thrilling two-horse show-down in racing history.

Neck and neck at the mile marker, the horses remain in virtual lockstep for the final half mile. Crossing the finish line first—by a nose—Affirmed becomes just the 11th horse to take the Triple Crown, running the third fastest time ever at Belmont. Alydar has the distinction of becoming the only horse to take second at every Triple Crown Race. To this day, it's impossible to reference one without the other.

AUG. 8, 2012—
LONDON, ENGLAND

VOLLEYBALL GODDESSES SPIKE ONE LAST GOLD

Validating any young Olympic event played on sand in bikinis can take time. So does establishing world domination of it. U.S. beach volleyball power-pair Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh Jennings didn't cut any corners on their 12-year journey to become the greatest Olympic duo to ever set bare feet on a court—while forming one of the most invincible partnerships in any sport.

Introduced as a demonstration event in the 1992 Olympic Games and then as an official Olympic sport in 1996, beach volleyball hits a milestone at the 2012 London Olympics when Walsh Jennings and May-Treanor take their third consecutive gold medal after winning every single match they've played at the Summer Games dating back to 2004—a perfect 21–0 record.

The pair's longest win streak is 112 matches and 19 straight tournaments across all competitions. The London Olympics will be their final one.

In a tight 21–16, 21–16 victory over U.S.'s Jennifer Kessy and April Ross (after a nail-biter 22–20, 22–20 semifinals against China), the teammates complete their remarkable run at that great bastion of beach volleyball—London's Horse Guard Parade, with a bewildered but approving Big Ben hovering nearby, and chiming in from time to time.

"The reality is it's really an athletic, beautiful sport," Walsh Jennings tells ESPN in London after the victory, still stumping for the game after all those years. "The uniform should attract people."

"We set the bar very high," May-Treanor says to *The Washington Post* before announcing her retirement. "And we extended ourselves over that bar even higher."

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DYLAN ALCOTT ACES THE GOLDEN SLAM

SEPT. 12, 2021—QUEENS, NY

Winning a Grand Slam title in tennis is a stunning lifetime achievement. Winning all four of them in a single year and adding a Paralympic/Olympic gold medal for good measure—aka "the Golden Slam"—should comfortably cover at least five exceptional lifetimes.

When Australian tennis phenomenon Dylan Alcott achieves this nearly impossible feat at age 30 with a straight sets victory in the U.S. Open quad singles final, he's typically self-effacing, inspiring and funny.

"Thanks for making the dreams of a young, fat, disabled kid with a really bad haircut come true," says the winner of 15 Grand Slam singles titles and eight doubles championships (plus an earlier pair of medals in Paralympic wheelchair basketball) before an emotional crowd at Flushing Meadows. "I used to hate myself so much. I hated my disability. I didn't even want to be here anymore. Then I found tennis and it changed and saved my life."

Amazingly, two of only three Golden Slams ever achieved in tennis history will be accomplished on a single day—with Diede de Groot of the Netherlands completing her incredible sweep after a U.S. Open victory in the women's wheelchair tennis finals a few hours before Alcott.

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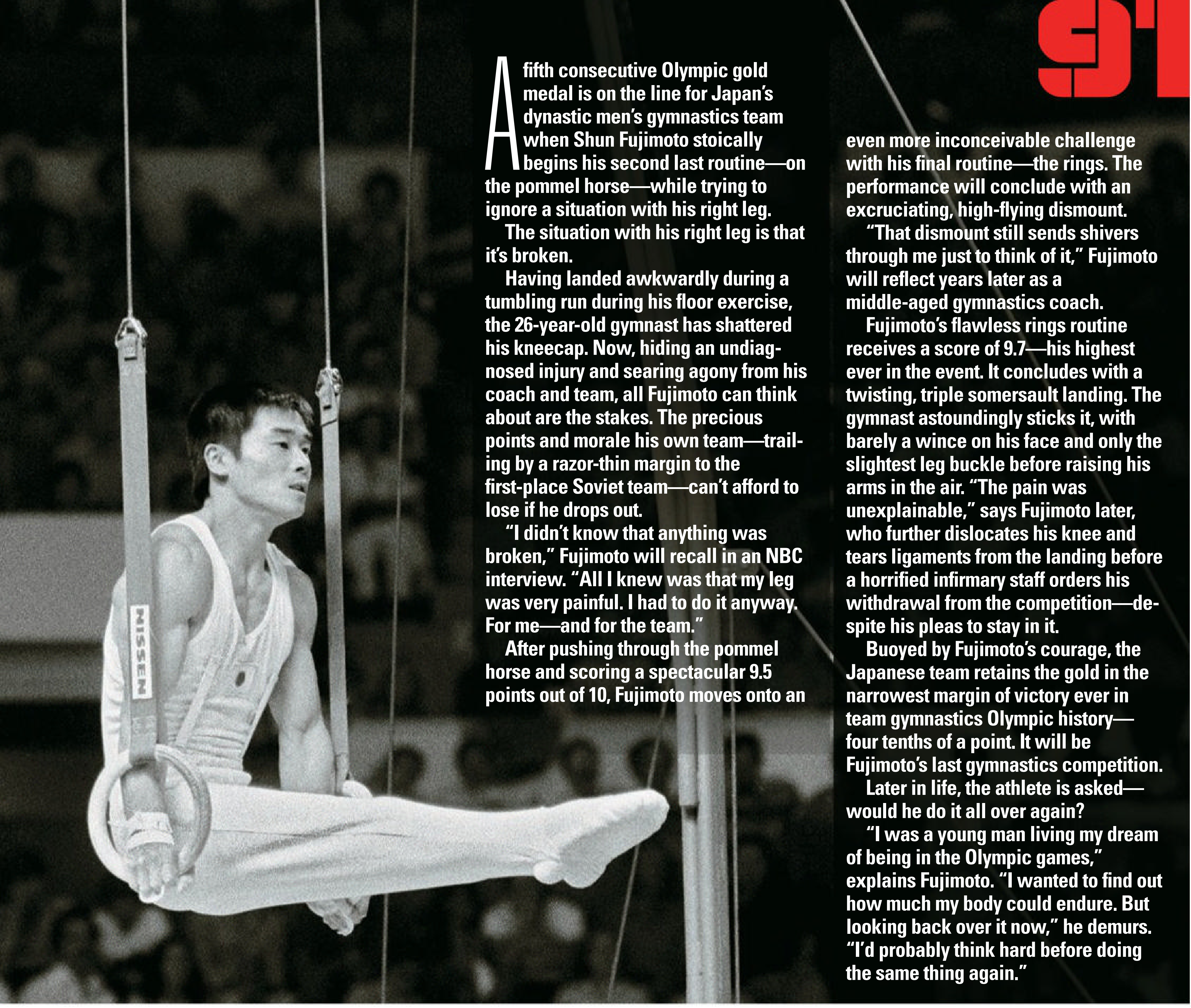
Shun Fujimoto REDEFINES GRIT

JULY 20, 1976—MONTREAL, CANADA



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A fifth consecutive Olympic gold medal is on the line for Japan's dynastic men's gymnastics team when Shun Fujimoto stoically begins his second last routine—on the pommel horse—while trying to ignore a situation with his right leg.

The situation with his right leg is that it's broken.

Having landed awkwardly during a tumbling run during his floor exercise, the 26-year-old gymnast has shattered his kneecap. Now, hiding an undiagnosed injury and searing agony from his coach and team, all Fujimoto can think about are the stakes. The precious points and morale his own team—trailing by a razor-thin margin to the first-place Soviet team—can't afford to lose if he drops out.

"I didn't know that anything was broken," Fujimoto will recall in an NBC interview. "All I knew was that my leg was very painful. I had to do it anyway. For me—and for the team."

After pushing through the pommel horse and scoring a spectacular 9.5 points out of 10, Fujimoto moves onto an even more inconceivable challenge with his final routine—the rings. The performance will conclude with an excruciating, high-flying dismount.

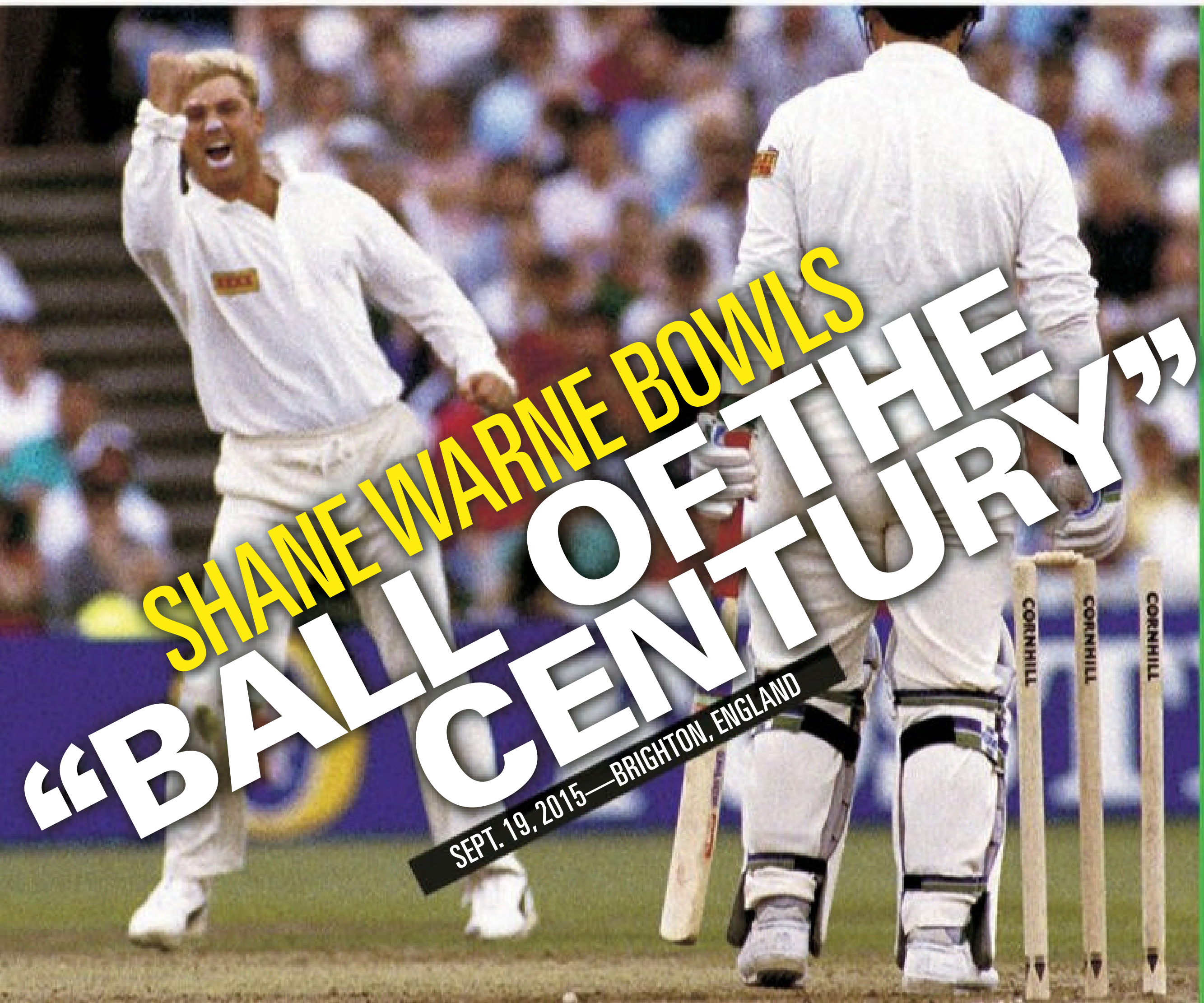
"That dismount still sends shivers through me just to think of it," Fujimoto will reflect years later as a middle-aged gymnastics coach.

Fujimoto's flawless rings routine receives a score of 9.7—his highest ever in the event. It concludes with a twisting, triple somersault landing. The gymnast astoundingly sticks it, with barely a wince on his face and only the slightest leg buckle before raising his arms in the air. "The pain was unexplainable," says Fujimoto later, who further dislocates his knee and tears ligaments from the landing before a horrified infirmary staff orders his withdrawal from the competition—despite his pleas to stay in it.

Buoyed by Fujimoto's courage, the Japanese team retains the gold in the narrowest margin of victory ever in team gymnastics Olympic history—four tenths of a point. It will be Fujimoto's last gymnastics competition.

Later in life, the athlete is asked—would he do it all over again?

"I was a young man living my dream of being in the Olympic games," explains Fujimoto. "I wanted to find out how much my body could endure. But looking back over it now," he demurs. "I'd probably think hard before doing the same thing again."



SHANE WARNE BOWLS "BALL OF THE CENTURY"

SEPT. 19, 2015—BRIGHTON, ENGLAND

Australian ace bowler Shane Warne, aka "The Sultan of Spin," will celebrate a long, legendary cricket career tormenting his opponents with some of the most confounding spin bowls ever thrown in the game. But his first bowl of the '93 Ashes series as a rookie against feared batsman and England captain Mike Gatting is the wildest of them all.

Hurled far outside leg, the ball spins viciously. Altering course by nearly two feet at the last possible moment, it traverses directly across Gatting before elegantly scalping his stump like magic. Out!

Gatting stands there bewildered. Warne's zinc-painted face grins ear to ear. And cricket spins into a new era.

"It's very seldom that you see the course of history altered by the trajectory of a single delivery," cricket writer and Warne biographer Gideon Haigh will later tell BBC Sport. "That certainly happened with that ball. Warne made us doubt the evidence of our own eyes."

A record holder for the most Ashes series wickets in history, Shane Warne will call his most famous bowl "a fluke... but a pretty good one."

89

MAGIC & BIRD GIVE LUNCH A SHOT

JULY 1985—FRENCH LICK, IN

It took nothing more and nothing less than a family meal in French Lick, IN, to evolve basketball's most amped arch-rivalry—said to have saved the NBA—into something even better.

When L.A. Lakers superstar Earvin "Magic" Johnson finds himself stuck in the hometown of Boston Celtics icon Larry Bird for a Converse commercial, it's awkward enough that the famous courtside foes who've been glaring across the paint at each other since college ball—and for years from the two most mutually loathing teams in pro sports now have to plug shoes together in front of a camera.

During the shoot, they barely speak.

Johnson is heading back alone to his trailer when Bird unexpectedly invites him to his mom's place for lunch. Until now, the Lansing, MI-raised point guard has never had an actual conversation with his Hoosier nemesis. He's been too busy despising him.

"I'm nervous!" Johnson will recall in an NPR interview years later about being blindsided by the most famous hatchet-burying lunch invitation in sports. "I'm going crazy—like, what's gonna happen?"

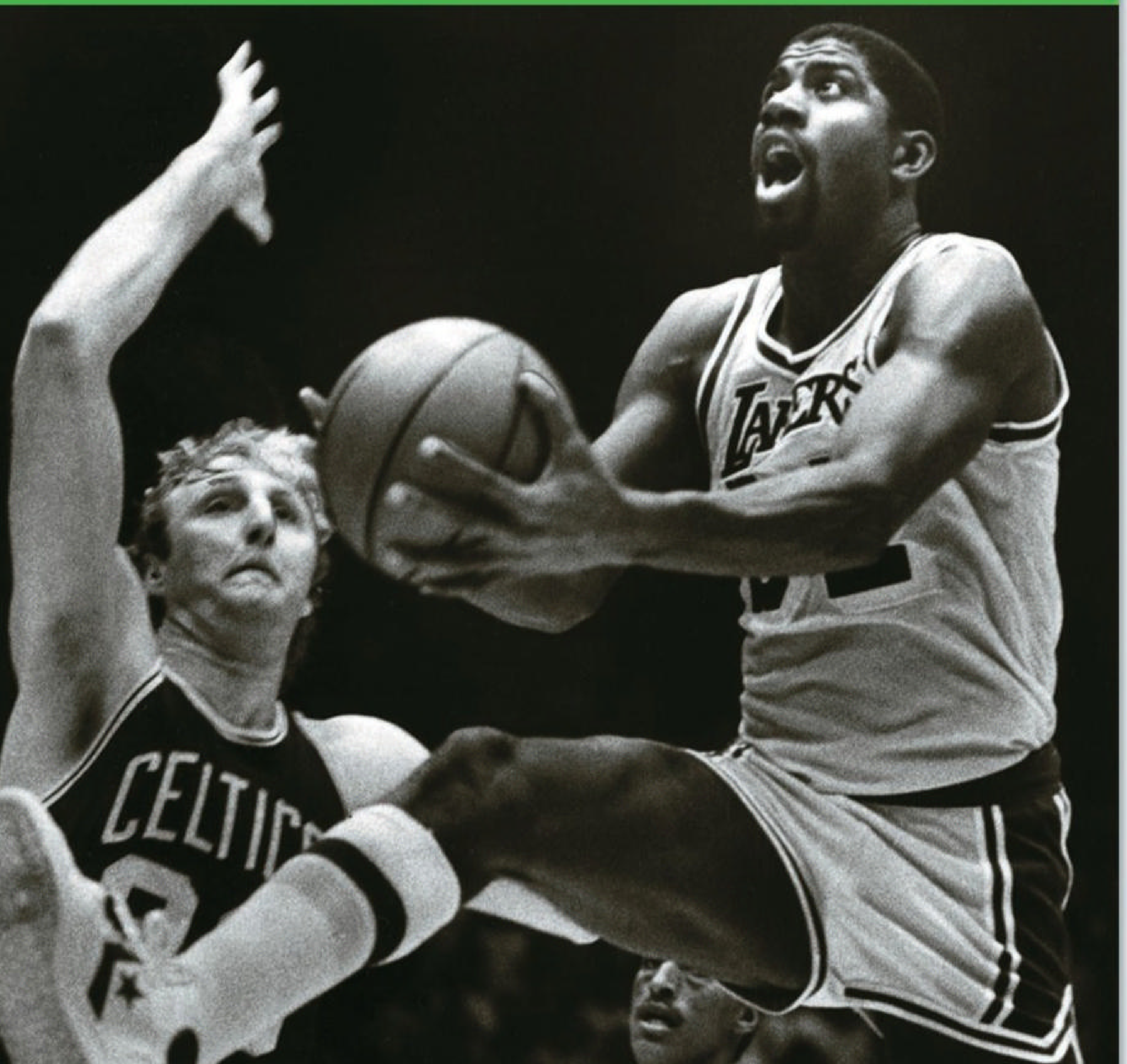
What happens—right after Larry's mom greets Johnson at the door with a warm, ice-breaking hug —is that the two seemingly polar opposites realize they actually have a lot in common. "We're both from the Midwest, we grew up poor, our families are everything to us, basketball is everything to us," Johnson tells NPR. Against all odds, racial stereotypes, headline-fueled hostilities, etc., they totally relate to each other. They like each other.

"That [visit] changed my whole outlook on Larry Bird," says Johnson, who will form a deepening friendship with his opponent-in-chief over the years, and come to rely on him for support during difficult times.

That said—after lunch, basketball is still basketball.

"Once me and Magic left that commercial shoot in Indiana," Bird qualifies, "it was back to business."

The future Hall of Famers will meet in two more heated championship series before finally reconvening at a packed Boston Garden for Bird's retirement ceremony in 1993. "I love you. I respect you. I admire you," Johnson will tell Bird on the court, before presenting him with a Lakers jersey: "To the greatest basketball player ever—but more importantly, a friend forever."



LEFT: BOSTON GLOBE / CONTRIBUTOR; RIGHT: © 2010 / COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIQUE (CIO) / EVANS, JASON

88

Shaun White REACHES HALFPIPE McMILESTONE

FEB. 17, 2010—VANCOUVER, CANADA

How does a snowboarding prodigy leap beyond his usual bag of tricks while securing blue-chip status for a sport that was once anything but? Simply by dreaming up the sickest stunt of its time, branding it with a name that would make Ray Kroc proud, and performing it flawlessly in front of millions of viewers during Winter Olympic competition.

When defending gold medalist Shaun White enters the 2010 Vancouver Games as the heavy favorite, the 23-year-old halfpipe king still hasn't attempted his new signature move—the Double McTwist 1260—in major competition. White's recent attempt during practice at the X Games led to a frightening spill and a head injury that could've been far worse than it was.

With a gold medal safely in the bag after two runs of perfect double corks, frontside 540s and backside 9s, White goes for it on the final jump of his third run. Three and a half twists and a pair of head-over-heels flips, all before landing with his feet and head in the right spots and arms thrust triumphantly in the air: Double McTwist 1260.

The jump gives White his highest scoring run of the day. It also paves the way for even more incredible feats up ahead in snowboarding—including Ayumu Hirano's Triple Cork at the 2022 Beijing Olympics and Hiroto Ogiwara's crazy backside 2160 shortly thereafter.

"I knew I had it in me," White will say after skipping the Double McTwist on his opening runs on Vancouver's Cypress Mountain before making his historic jump. "But the Olympics is pretty heavy. I was sweating it a little."

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86

TREVOR BRAZILE BUCKLES UP IN THE FINAL ROUND

DEC. 15, 2018— LAS VEGAS, NV

It's never over 'til it's over—especially if your name is Trevor "King of the Cowboys" Brazile, and you're competing against your kid brother-in-law for one last rodeo crown.

After dominating PRCA competition for over two decades, the winningest rodeo superstar in history enters the 2018 Wrangler National Finals Rodeo with a record 23 world champion gold buckles—and a surprise announcement that he'll be retiring after this go-round. Or, at least, semiretiring.

"My priorities have officially changed," says the 46-year-old rodeo veteran and family man from Decatur, TX.

Before that happens though, Brazile intends to make it an even two dozen gold buckles in his final rodeo "Super Bowl." Competing against defending all-around NFR champ, Tuff Cooper (Brazile's protégé brother-in-law), that's nowhere near a given.

Cut to the 10th and final round: Brazile needs a last-chance, tie-down victory to outduel Cooper for the all-world title. Aboard his horse Deputy, he gets it—with a clutch, 7.2-second performance that wins him the round (by two tenths of a second) and secures his 24th world championship and record 14th All-Around Cowboy Champion title to boot.

"Everything I got's because of rodeo, and the fans are worth more than the buckles," says an emotional Brazile during a post-victory speech.

In semiretirement, Brazile will add two more world champ titles to his name before his induction into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame in 2022.

87

LEO BARRY MAKES HIS MARK

SEPT. 24, 2005
—MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Entering the Australian Football League Grand Final in 2005, the Sydney Swans and their patient fans have far more than a single season on the line during a tightly fought match against the West Coast Eagles at the Melbourne Cricket Grounds. The Swans haven't won a championship in 72 years—the longest drought in AFL history.

With the clock ticking down and desperate Sydney hanging on to a slim, four-point lead, Eagles' ruckman Dean Cox punts a long ball upfield—within scoring distance of the Swans' goal.

The ball arcs down toward a swarm of Eagles manning the forward line. A West Coast retention here will all but guarantee a last-minute, championship-winning goal for the Eagles—and 73 years of bad luck for the Sydney Swans.

Out of nowhere, Leo Barry hurtles into the fray.

Sydney's hard-charging full-back, nicknamed "Leaping Leo" for his spectacular jumping marks, does it again. Flying high above the horde like an overprotective waterfowl among deadly raptors in sweaty sleeveless jerseys, the Swans savior snags the ball for a championship-saving mark.

Moments later, the final siren sounds. The Swans win it. Barry's mark becomes the biggest, curse-breaking save in Aussie Rules lore.

"As a small kid, you always dream of playing in the Grand Final and kicking the winning goal," Barry later reflects. "I think this was one for the backmen."

LEFT: ADAM PRETTY / STAFF; RIGHT: JAMES PHIFER

Iron Bowl Ends LIKE NEVER BEFORE

NOV. 30, 2013—AUBURN, AL

The annual Iron Bowl between the Auburn Tigers and the Alabama Crimson Tide is the biggest U.S. college football game south of the Mason-Dixon Line—and, genealogically speaking, the biggest any-sort-of-game pretty much anywhere.

Just ask a fifth-generation Alabaman, who'll be happy to tell you all about the 1893 inaugural game (Auburn 32–Alabama 22) like it happened last Saturday. Or the 1948 "second-inaugural game" (Alabama 55–Auburn 0), which followed a bitter 41-year series hiatus over a hazy 1907 dispute that's still being debated. Or the 1972 "Punt, 'Bama, Punt" game when Auburn's David Langner ran in two blocked punts for touchdowns in a 17–16 Auburn victory. Or any other game involving Dixie's grittiest football rivalry, which seems to attract big, crazy moments that'll never, ever heal.

The craziest one yet happens at the end of the 78th Iron Bowl in a play immortalized as the "Kick Six."

With an SEC Championship Game berth likely on the line, an underdog Auburn rallies to tie up the game on a scrambling 39-yard touchdown reception with half a minute left in the 4th quarter. Two-time defending national champion Alabama then runs the ball back to set up for a game-winning, 57-yard field goal with a second left. The kick drops short before the posts and into the hands of Auburn's Chris Davis, who'll run the ball out on a zero clock. Then we'll be heading into overtime.

Or we're all assuming so—including Auburn radio announcer Rod Bramblett.

"Here goes Chris Davis," says Bramblett impassively. "He'll run it out. To the 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 45... There goes Davis! Davis is going to run it all the way back!! Auburn's gonna win the football game!!! AUBURN'S GONNA WIN THE FOOTBALL GAME! He ran the missed field goal back! He ran it back 109 yards! Holy Cow! Oh, my God! Auburn wins! Auburn has won the Iron Bowl! Auburn has won the Iron Bowl in the most unbelievable fashion you will ever see!!"

Davis' record-setting, end-to-end, walk-off touchdown return through an inexplicably dozing Alabama Crimson Tide will be tapped as the single greatest moment in college football history. Unless you live anywhere near Tuscaloosa.

18

ERIC HEIDEN WINS FIVE GOLD MEDALS— THEN GLIDES BACK UNDER THE RADAR

FEB. 23, 1980—LAKE PLACID, NY

The night before his fifth and final speed-skating race at the storied 1980 Olympic Games in Lake Placid, Eric Heiden attends the U.S. vs. Soviet Union "Miracle on Ice" hockey championship. Thrilled by the underdog American team's spectacular victory, he has trouble falling asleep that night and snoozes over an hour past his alarm.

Grabbing two pieces of bread and hightailing it to the men's 10,000-meter race, the 21-year-old speed skating sensation sets up beside the Soviet Union's Viktor Leskin—the current world record holder in the event.

The two skaters are dead even for the first five laps. Then Heiden starts pulling ahead, stride after stride, to a now familiar chant: "Er-ic, Er-ic, Er-ic …"

Twenty loops later, with Leskin nearly lapped at this point, Heiden crushes the world record in the 10,000-meter by 6.2 seconds. Winning his fifth gold medal in as many individual races, Heiden's unprecedented performance makes him, at the time, the most decorated athlete ever at a single Winter Olympics.

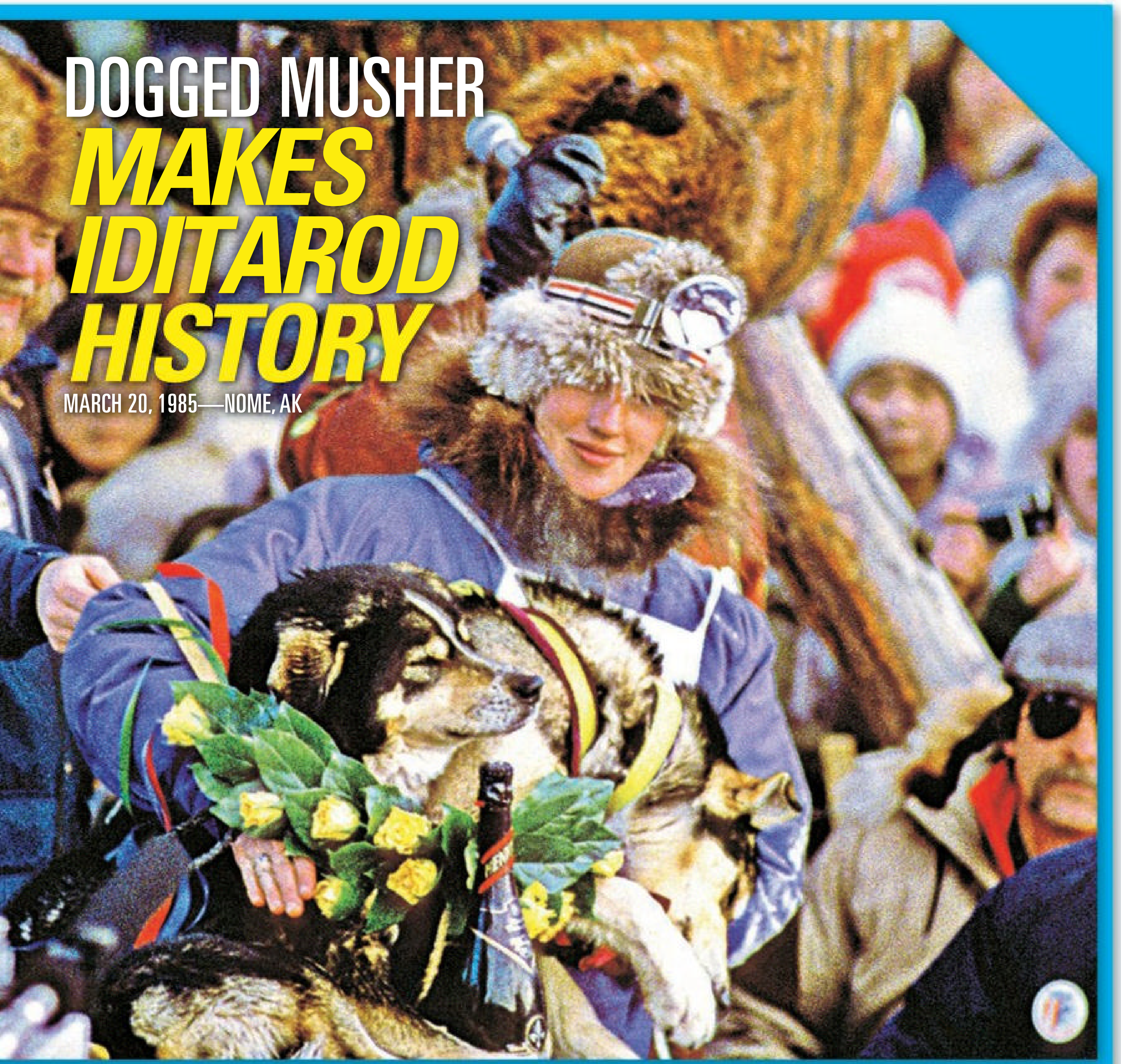
"They'll probably sit where the rest of them are—in my mom's dresser, collecting dust," the insta-megastar Olympian and three-time World Championship title holder tells reporters about his new medal collection, eschewing the spotlight as soon as it arrives. "Gold, silver and bronze isn't special," he adds. "It's giving 100 percent and knowing you've done the best you can."

Turning down lucrative sponsorship deals, the Wheaties box shoo-in will instead soon abdicate his brief speed-skating throne to pursue other challenges in the understated-over-achiever category: first cycling, where he'll win the U.S. Professional Cycling Championship and be inducted into the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame; later orthopedics, with a successful medical practice in Park City, UT.

"Maybe if things had stayed the way they were, and I could still be obscure in an obscure sport, I might've wanted to keep skating," Heiden later tells ESPN. "I really liked it best when I was a nobody."

DOGGED MUSHER *MAKES IDITAROD HISTORY*

MARCH 20, 1985—NOME, AK



In sled dog racing, as in most other things, respect must be earned," Libby Riddles will pen in *Race Across Alaska*, recounting her journey three years earlier to become the first woman to win the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in 1985.

Few champions in the dude-dominated mushing world will be forced to earn it quite like Riddles. The virtually unknown, 28-year-old underdog enters the 1,000-plus-mile race from Anchorage to Nome during a season hit with horrible late winter forecasts. Bad storms, tough trails, and every other kind of potentially dire situation in the Alaskan outback are pretty much guaranteed during one of the most grueling races on the planet. This year is worse.

The Iditarod of '85 sees some of the nastiest weather in race history. Bad enough to force lead mushers to wait it out at a village checkpoint. Riddles presses on. Camping in the freezing cold, she forges across nearly 60 miles of treacherous sea ice in a blinding blizzard—taking over first place in the gambit.

Ahead by 50 miles at one point, Riddles will hold the lead all the way to the finish line at Nome after 18 days, 20 minutes and 17 seconds on the trail.

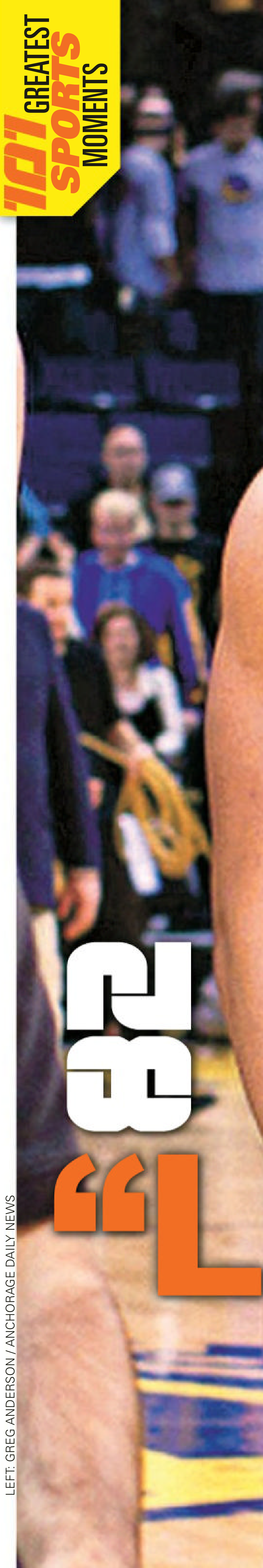
News of her victory will instantly go global. It will also swiftly lead to more female champions—most notably, Iditarod legend Susan Butcher, who'll win the race the following three consecutive years with record-breaking times before notching her fourth victory in 1990.

Riddles' electrifying triumph in 1985 is the icebreaker.

"It was one of the race's pivotal moments," notes the Alaska Sports Hall of Fame. "It broadened the Iditarod's fan base while inspiring women—and T-shirts reading, 'Alaska: Where Men Are Men and Women Win the Iditarod.'"

83

LEFT: GREG ANDERSON / ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS



Jeremy Lin appears to come from out of nowhere when he makes his first fill-in NBA start a week after signing with the New York Knicks mid-season. Until now, the 23-year-old, California-raised, Harvard-educated, first-ever Taiwanese-American player in the league has spent two seasons riding the bench, jumping on the court for NBA "Asian Heritage Nights," and getting sent back down to the D-League—all while being dismissed by *The New York Times* as "a smart passer with a flawed jump shot and a thin frame."

A chance break at starting point guard for the ailing Knicks will spark the biggest monthlong phenomenon in NBA history.

It begins on Feb. 4, when a barely known Lin leads the Knicks to only their fourth victory in 14 games. Sinking 25 points with seven assists and five rebounds, Lin's performance leaves New York fans elated and speechless—including Lin himself: "This night hasn't really sunk in, to be honest," he says to a slew of unexpected cameras.

In his next game, Lin leads the Knicks with 28 points for another win. And then 23 points for a third straight victory, while collecting his first NBA slam dunk—and sending an already-launched media frenzy deeper into orbit.

Fever pitch hits in New York on Feb. 10. During a Knicks home court victory over the mighty Los Angeles Lakers, Lin scores a career high 38 points, outperforming superstar opponent Kobe Bryant at an uncontainable Madison Square Garden.

"Players playing that well don't usually come out of nowhere," Bryant tells ESPN after the game. "His skill level was probably there from the beginning. It probably just went unnoticed."

"We overlooked him, I guess," says a mystified Laker center Pau Gasol. "I don't know."

Dubbed "Linsanity"—the player's remarkable run through February will place him on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* (twice) and *Time* by month's end. It will lead to sellout Lin jerseys and other Lin merchandise, Lin-related athletic apparel from Nike and Adidas, and a "Lin-Sanity" frozen yogurt flavor from Ben & Jerry's.

It will trigger a global wave of Asian pride.

And then it will ebb nearly as fast in March, and end in April when the NBA's biggest surprise star is sidelined with a torn meniscus.

Signing with the Houston Rockets the following season, Lin will notch one more 38-point game before bouncing to the Lakers, Charlotte Hornets, Brooklyn Nets, Atlanta Hawks and Toronto Raptors. Afterward, he will join the Beijing Ducks in the Chinese Basketball Association.

INSANITY" OVERTHROWS MSG

FEB. 10, 2012—NEW YORK, NY

81

PROTOPOPOVS JUMP-START RUSSIAN FIGURE SKATING REIGN

JAN. 29, 1964—INNSBRUCK, AUSTRIA

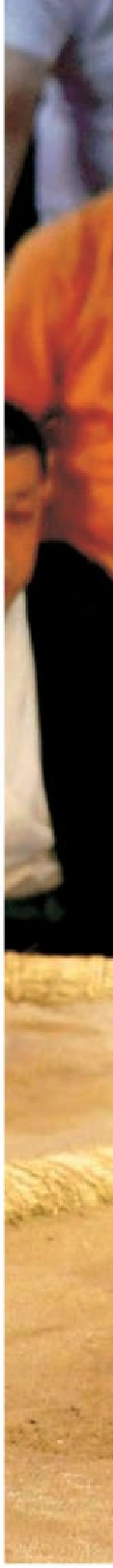
If pairs figure skating boils down to a certain undefinable chemistry—on top of the usual insane skill, flawless technique, spunky athleticism, interweaving artistry, and let's not forget singular charm—Soviet skaters Ludmila Belousova and Oleg Protopopov possess it at the molecular level on the opening day of the 1964 Olympic Games.

Forming one of the most elegant, creative and globally beloved partnerships ever on ice, the husband-and-wife skaters (aka "The Protopopovs") deliver a pairs performance that borders on reinvention. Introducing their hallmark romantic style—analysts liken it to a Russian ballet on ice—the couple's routine introduces a mix of slow sensual moves and magnificent technical innovations that will become standards in later years.

In Innsbruck, the Protopopovs edge out German World Champions Marika Kilius and Hans-Jürgen Bäumler by less than a point to win the first-ever USSR/Russian Olympic gold medal in pairs figure skating. It will begin the longest consecutive win streak for a country in any event in the Winter Olympics. Russia will take the gold in pairs figuring skating for the next 46 years, from 1964 through 2006.

"The Protopopovs started a generation of style on ice," says figure skating icon Dick Button at a show years later in Lake Placid, where the couple will come to make their summer home and perform regularly. "Not only were they the finest of Olympic champions, but their creative impact was extraordinary."

Winning their second Olympic gold medal in 1968 and four consecutive World and European Championships, the couple will dominate pairs competition through the decade before being deemed too old to compete in the 1972 Games by Soviet authorities. Later defecting to Switzerland, they'll go on to headline as favorites in professional ice shows well into their 60s.



LEFT: © 1964 / COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIQUE; RIGHT: KYODO

Hakuhō Shō Hoists One Last Emperor's Cup

80

JULY 18, 2021—
NAGOYA, JAPAN

Entering what's rumored to be his final competition at the Nagoya Grand Sumo Tournament, Hakuhō Shō isn't the hands-down favorite for once. The greatest sumo wrestler of all time, winner of 44 championships, has sat out his last six events with injuries. He's just returned from knee surgery. Now he'll be facing a spate of enormous, hungry 20-somethings in sumo's top Makuuchi division who want nothing more than to take down the sport's 36-year-old, 6-foot-4, 340-pound legendary yokozuna.

Yokozuna is the highest achievable rank in sumo. Since the mid-17th century, there have been just 73 of them to date. Hakuhō, the 69th yokozuna, is the longest-serving one of all time with the most victories—by far. As yokozuna, he's won 899 matches. In all, the Mongolia-born sumo superstar has collected nearly 1,200 victories in his 20-year career.

Wrestling his way through 15 more in Nagoya, he wins them all, though it's not always pretty. Hakuhō's challenger in the finals is the larger, younger, also unbeaten and terrifying Terunofuji—the current reigning champion—entering the dohyō with a perfect 15-0 record in the tournament too.

The crowd falls silent. The pair of topknotted giants crouch their massive frames at opposite ends of the circle. They lower their ham-sized fists into the clay. Stare blankly ahead. Then suddenly hurl themselves at each other like semis. Pushing, slapping, belt-grabbing, spinning, strategizing, leaning chest-to-chest, exhibiting unimaginable strength and surprising agility.

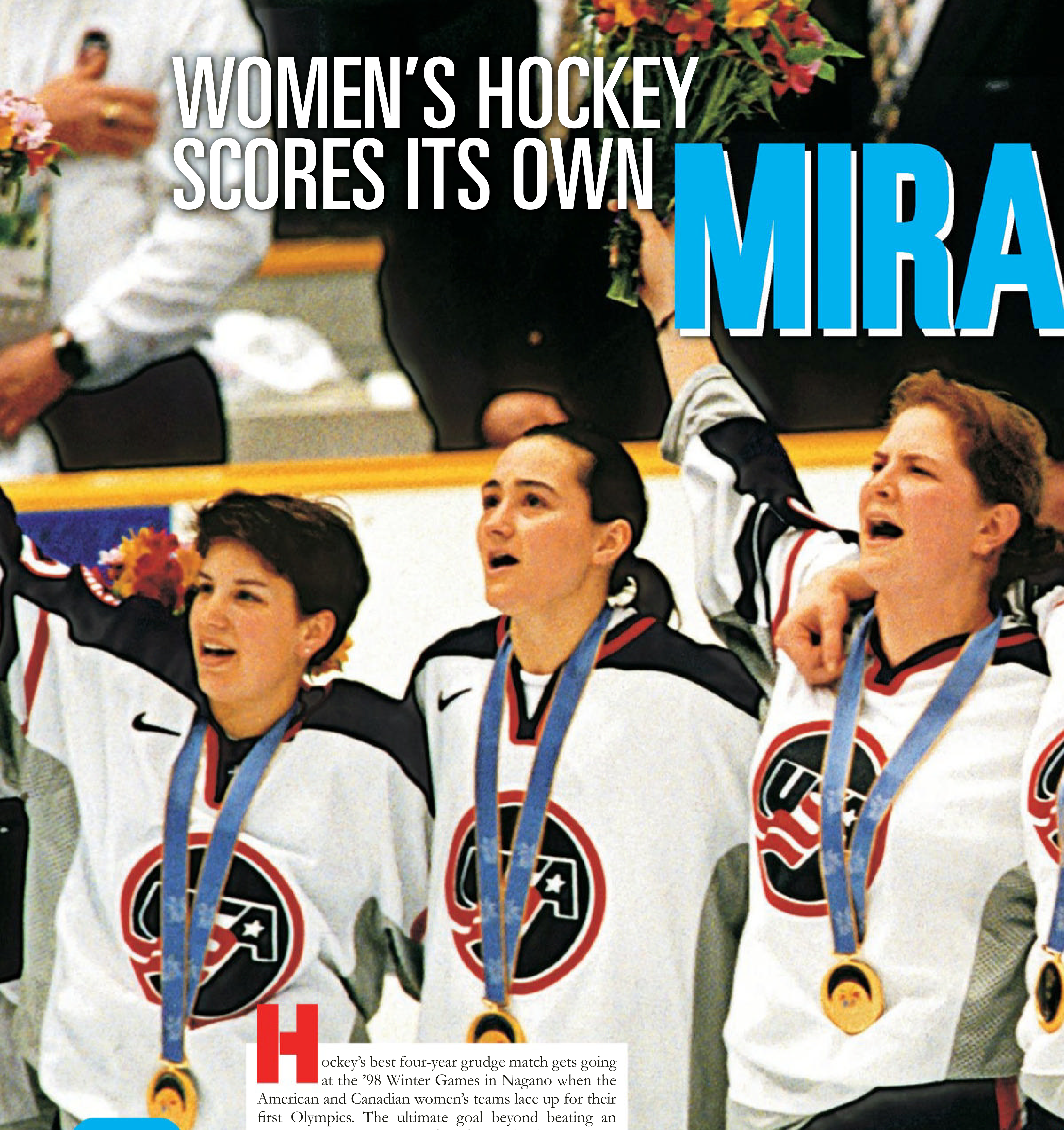
Hakuhō gains a clean hold of his opponent's arm, swings him like a 381-pound sack of flour and pushes Terunofuji to the ground. It's over. The whole thing takes 19.5 seconds.

Hakuhō affords himself a single fist pump and a quick victory howl. It's a rare display of emotion for the champion—and frowned upon by the Japan Sumo Association's Yokozuna Deliberation Council—but can you blame him? It's his 45th and final championship—after knee surgery.

"Let's not talk about it, I need to take a rest for a while," says the champion, raising another Emperor's Cup and deflecting questions about the looming possibility of his retirement. Then he throws his legions of fans a bone: "I'll do my best to win one more to reach my 900th [yokozuna] victory."

After resting on it for a few months, Hakuhō will decide to call it a day.

WOMEN'S HOCKEY SCORES ITS OWN MIRA



79

FEB. 17, 1998—NAGANO, JAPAN

Hockey's best four-year grudge match gets going at the '98 Winter Games in Nagano when the American and Canadian women's teams lace up for their first Olympics. The ultimate goal beyond beating an archrival is becoming the first female hockey team to wear an Olympic gold medal.

The two teams have met in every championship game since official world competition in women's hockey began in 1990. Canada has won all of them. Dominating their respective ways to the gold medal game in Nagano, they meet again—and there's more on the line than ever.

After a tight, scoreless first period, U.S. strikes first with a power play goal in the second period, before making it 2–0 in the third. Fighting back with a goal late in the game, Canada nearly ties it up in the final minute. An empty netter for the U.S. in the final eight seconds seals the deal.

After going undefeated in the tournament, while outscoring their opponents 36–8, the U.S. takes the first Olympic gold in women's hockey—while Canada settles for the first-ever silver.

"For so many years people told you that you shouldn't be on the ice because it was women's hockey and you couldn't go anywhere," U.S. team captain Cammi Granato says to the *Chicago Tribune*, after a moving medal ceremony. "And here you are with a gold medal around your neck."

Even hard-nosed Canadian coach Shannon Miller, shouldering a disappointing second place, softens to the

CLE ON ICE

US WOM
the real Dream Team
LOUISVILLE

bigger picture. "When I saw them put the gold medal on Cammi Granato, my feelings changed immediately," she says. "All I could think about is a gold medal being hung around the neck of a female hockey player. I couldn't believe how overcome I was."

Four years later, in the 2002 Olympics, the U.S. will settle for silver in another nail-biter against guess who. Canada and the U.S. will continue going helmet-to-helmet in all but one finals of Olympic women's hockey for the next two decades and counting.

'78

DOM SHEED THREADS THE NEEDLE

SEPT. 29, 2018—
MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

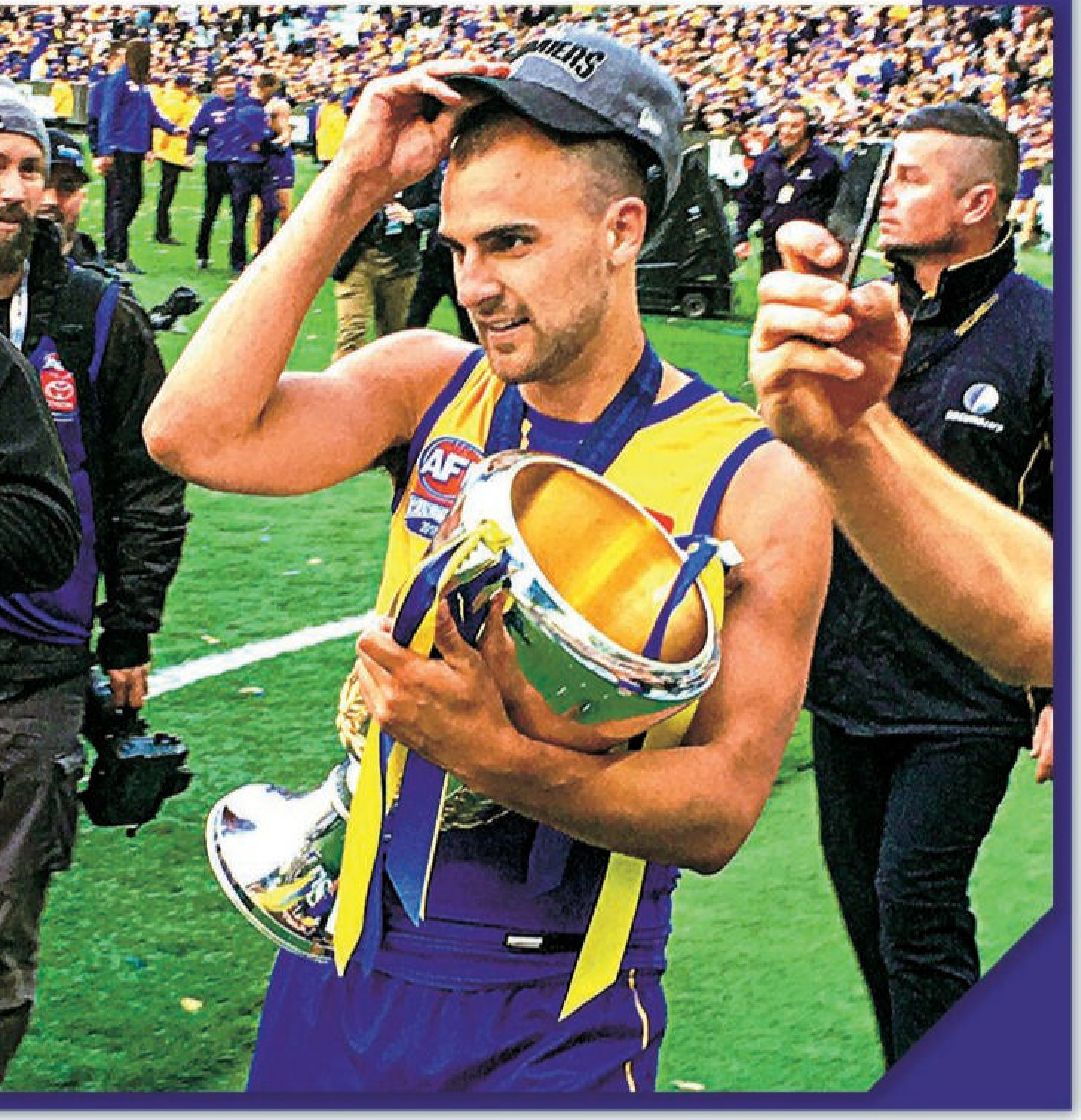
The opening quarter of the AFC Grand Final in front of a record 100,022 Australian Rules Football fans at the Melbourne Cricket Ground looks like the start of a runaway championship. Collingwood FC has taken an early five-goal lead against a West Coast Eagles team with fading hopes of bringing their first premiership home to Perth in over a decade.

Battling back later in the game, the Eagles will rescript the match into one of the tightest finals in league history. The climactic moment arrives after a chain of spectacular, end-to-end marks puts the ball into the hands of Eagles' midfielder Dom Sheed deep in the Collingwood zone with two minutes left and West Coast trailing by just two points.

With a premiership game on the line, Sheed coolly drop punts what has been called "the Impossible Goal"—threading it through the posts from nearly 50 yards out at a ridiculously tight angle.

Now known as "the kick" in AFL lore, Sheed has been deflecting questions about it from Australian sportswriters ever since.

"I'm sure it'll be something that I reflect on post my career, but for now I've well and truly parked that," a reluctant hero tells *The Age*. "It's one of those kicks where you're going to miss more often than not, if I'm honest."



'77

Mark Spitz Sweeps 7— & GOES PINUP

SEPT. 4, 1972—MUNICH, GERMANY

After dashed expectations of a gold sweep at the '68 Summer Games in Mexico City, Mark Spitz returns to the '72 Olympics in Munich for a second shot at proving he's the fastest swimmer on the planet.

In seven events—four individual swims and three relays—Spitz erases all doubt, while first proving to be one of the bigger poolside personalities at any Olympics.

"I'm not going to shave it off," Spitz tells reporters about his deviant mustache—a no-go for any swimmer fighting hundredths of a second. "Matter of fact, it allows the water to deflect off of my mouth," he says with a straight face. "I can get much lower and streamlined—get my behind up a little bit more. That's why I broke the world record in the butterfly events at the Olympic Trials four weeks ago."

The stache will be a nonfactor.

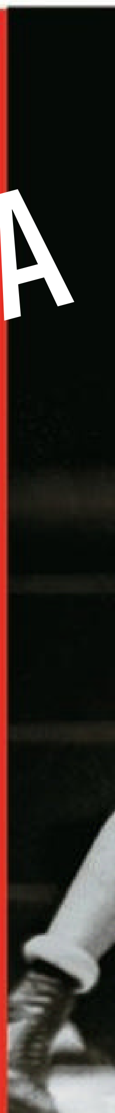
In his first six events, Spitz takes the gold in all of them—and breaks world

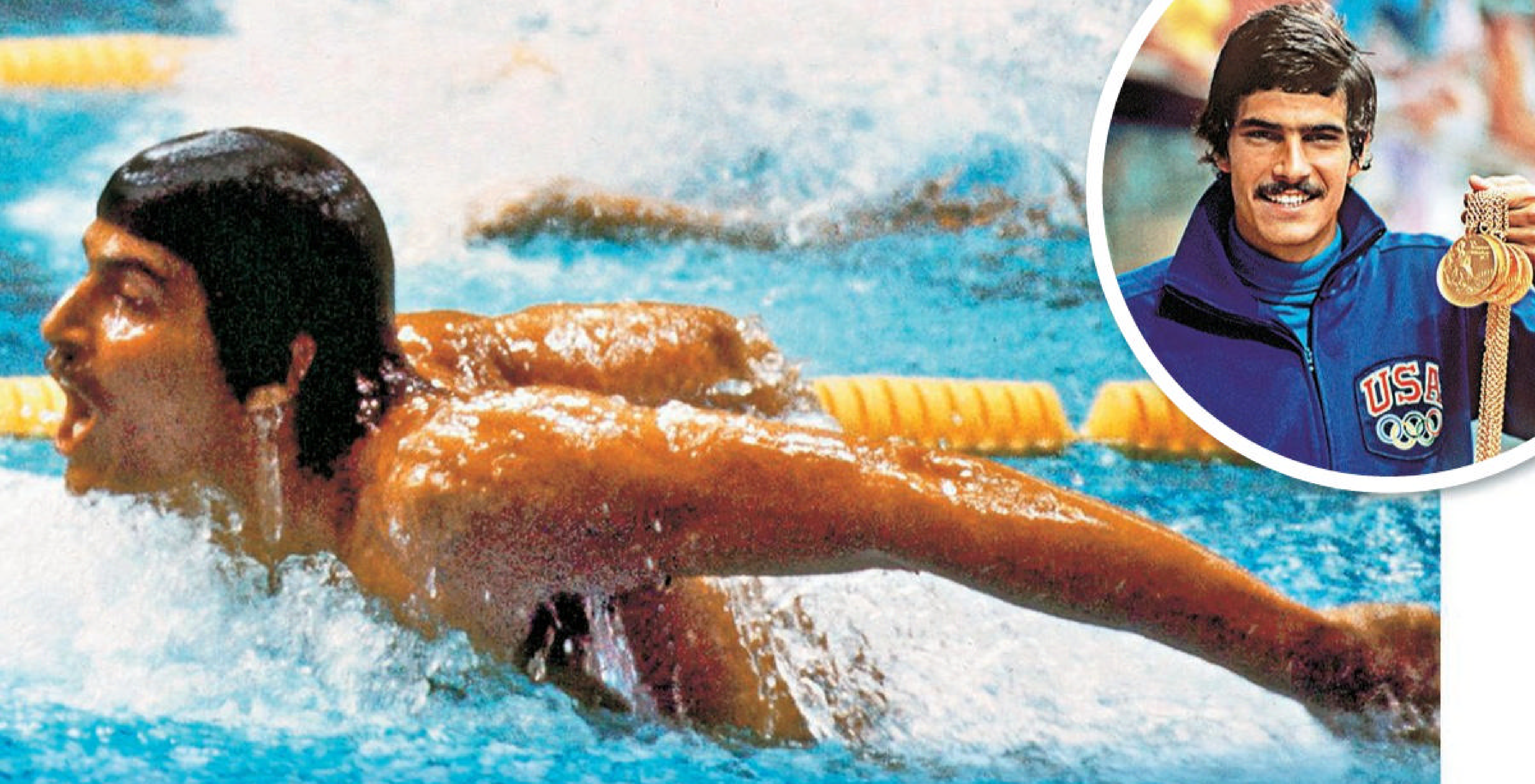
'76

JIM BRADDOCK BECOMES BOXING'S "CINDERELLA MAN"

JUNE 13, 1935—
QUEENS, NY

James "Jimmy" Braddock has a promising start in the ring before hitting the skids. The Hell's Kitchen–born, Jersey-reared boxer with a solid reputation for taking down bigger, meaner opponents has dropped just two of his first 34 bouts. Then the tides turn. Losing his life savings in the 1929 stock market crash, the 25-year-old





records each time.

During Spitz's climactic seventh and final event—the 4x100 meter medley relay—with teammates Mike Stamm, Tom Bruce and Jerry Heidenreich, the U.S. falls behind East Germany in the early laps before dramatically catching up. Swimming third, Spitz dominates in the butterfly—motoring the U.S. far ahead in one of the most decisive fly double laps in Olympic history before freestyle closer Heidenreich clinches it for the U.S. with another gold and one more world record for the books.

Spitz's seven gold medal feat won't be touched for nearly four decades until Michael Phelps' eight gold performance in 2008.

"It's kind of hard to believe," Spitz says in a TV interview afterward. "Some day I'll wake up and realize what I've done."

Retiring from swimming competition at age 22, Spitz becomes the busiest post-Olympic pitchman of the '70s. His calling card: a ubiquitous, barechested pinup donning seven golds and his signature Stars and Stripes Speedo. Endorsing everything from Adidas and Schick razors to the California Milk Advisory Board, he'll wrangle a brief Hollywood acting phase before turning to guest spots as an Olympic commentator, private life and a sailing hobby.

"I did very well, thank you very much," Spitz will later say in an interview about leveraging his Olympic achievements. "I'd say I was a pioneer."

Endorsing some humility too in a recent 2022 Olympic Channel documentary, Spitz will cite his father's frequent adage to him during his heyday: *Don't let it all go to your head.* "I was just an ordinary guy who trained hard and diligently," he reflects. "And, on one particular week, did extraordinary things."

light heavyweight fighter will also lose 16 of his next 26 fights—breaking his hand in one of them.

Scraping by as a Depression-era dockworker on welfare with three young kids, it looks like that's it for Braddock's boxing career—until a last-chance opportunity in the ring leads to three upset victories and suddenly a shot at the newly crowned World Heavyweight Champion, Max Baer.

No one is taking this fight seriously. No one except Jimmy Braddock, who's viewed as a sacrificial lamb for Baer, a fearsome hitter known for having killed a competitor in the ring. A 10–1 favorite, Baer has barely trained for this easy warm-up before his anticipated next opponent, Joe Louis.

In the early rounds, the straight-shooting Braddock sticks to his guns—landing solid jabs and power shots, while Baer drops his hands and sneers. With every round, a packed crowd at Madison Square Garden Bowl awaits the inevitable Baer attack while a patient and resilient Braddock shockingly outperforms his Goliath and controls the fight. Dropping the clown act, but far too late, Baer finds himself repeatedly boxed into a corner by an unwavering and underestimated no-name he was supposed to easily destroy.

After 15 rounds, Braddock is the winner by decision—crowned the new world heavyweight champion in one of boxing's biggest upsets. Dubbed "Cinderella Man" by Damon Runyon, Braddock will inspire the eponymous Hollywood crowd-pleaser starring Russell Crowe 70 years later.

In real life, the brief boxing champion (he'll lose to mighty Joe Louis in his next fight, but not before knocking him down in the fourth round) was more accurately nicknamed "Plain Jim" by those who knew him, says *The New York Times* in a 1974 obituary. He "looked more like the old-time, friendly Irish cop on the beat than a prizefighter—his patient manner marking his everyday pose, just as it did in the ring."

75

Mears and Johncock
TEST THE PHOTO FINISH

MAY 30, 1982—INDIANAPOLIS, IN

The most exciting Indianapolis 500 of all time? You'd think it would be a tougher call, with five Indy races in the last decade alone that have been won by less than half a second. The consensus still points to the race's 66th running in 1982, featuring some of the Speedway's greatest names ever and its highest sustained drama from start to photo finish.

The craziness begins before lap one. Approaching the green flag, driver Kevin Cogan loses control and spins out, taking several drivers with him before the race even starts—including a livid, second-row Mario Andretti. Also clipped in the incident is four-time winner A.J. Foyt, competing in his record 25th Indy 500. Foyt then ignites the crowd by recovering to take the lead for the first several laps, only to end up sidelined with transmission trouble stemming from the Cogan crash.

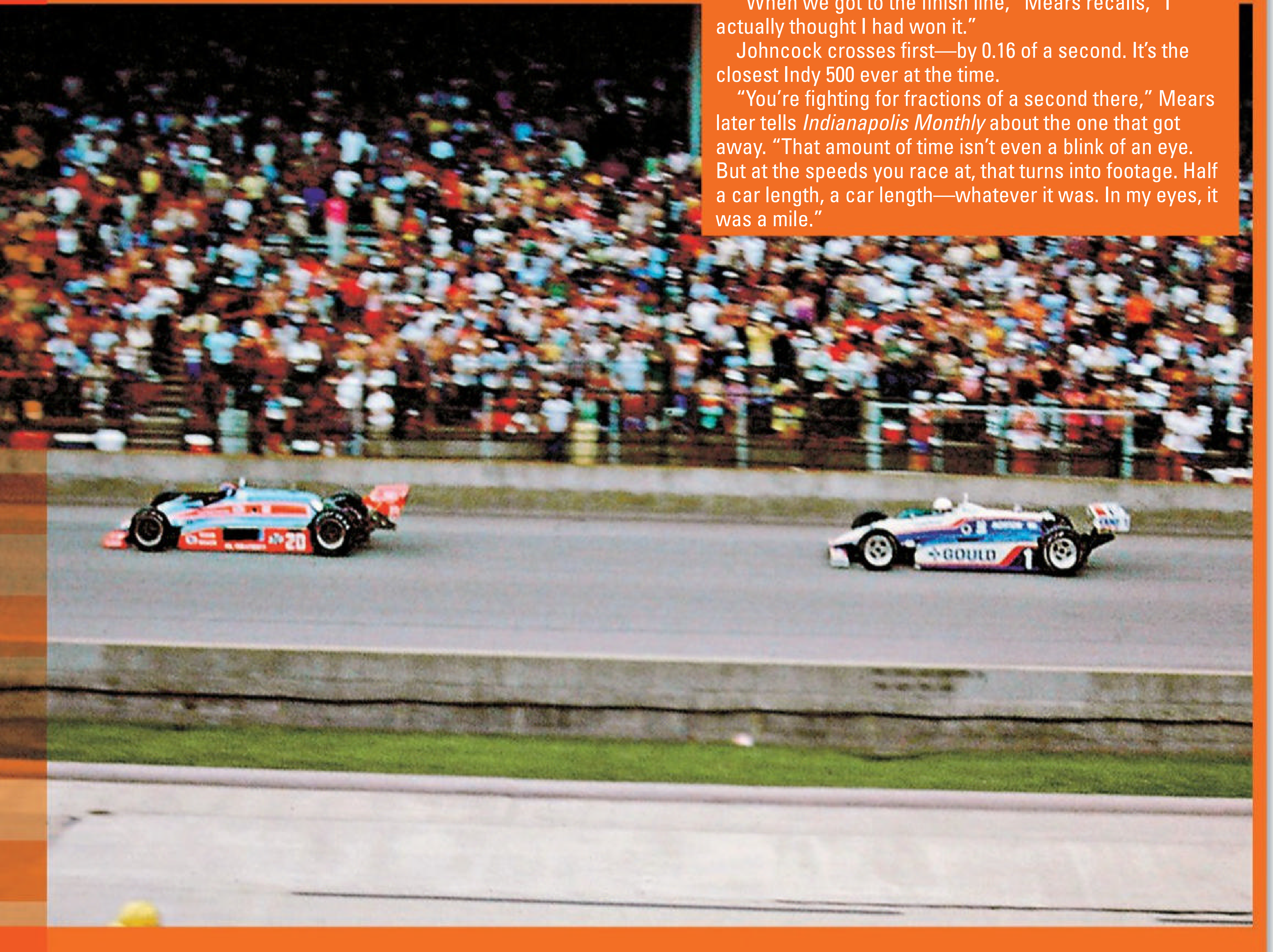
Back on the track, it's a carousel of brief front-runners before the race evolves into a straight-up dogfight between four-time Indy 500 winner Rick Mears and 1973 champion Gordon Johncock—in what is still considered the most exciting two-car duel in the race's history. The two drivers spend about 100 laps trading places, or trying to. With 40 to go, Johncock holds a razor-thin lead—extending it to 11 seconds after a final pit stop. In the faster, fuel-heavier car, Mears then slowly and dramatically begins closing in, lap after lap, second after second.

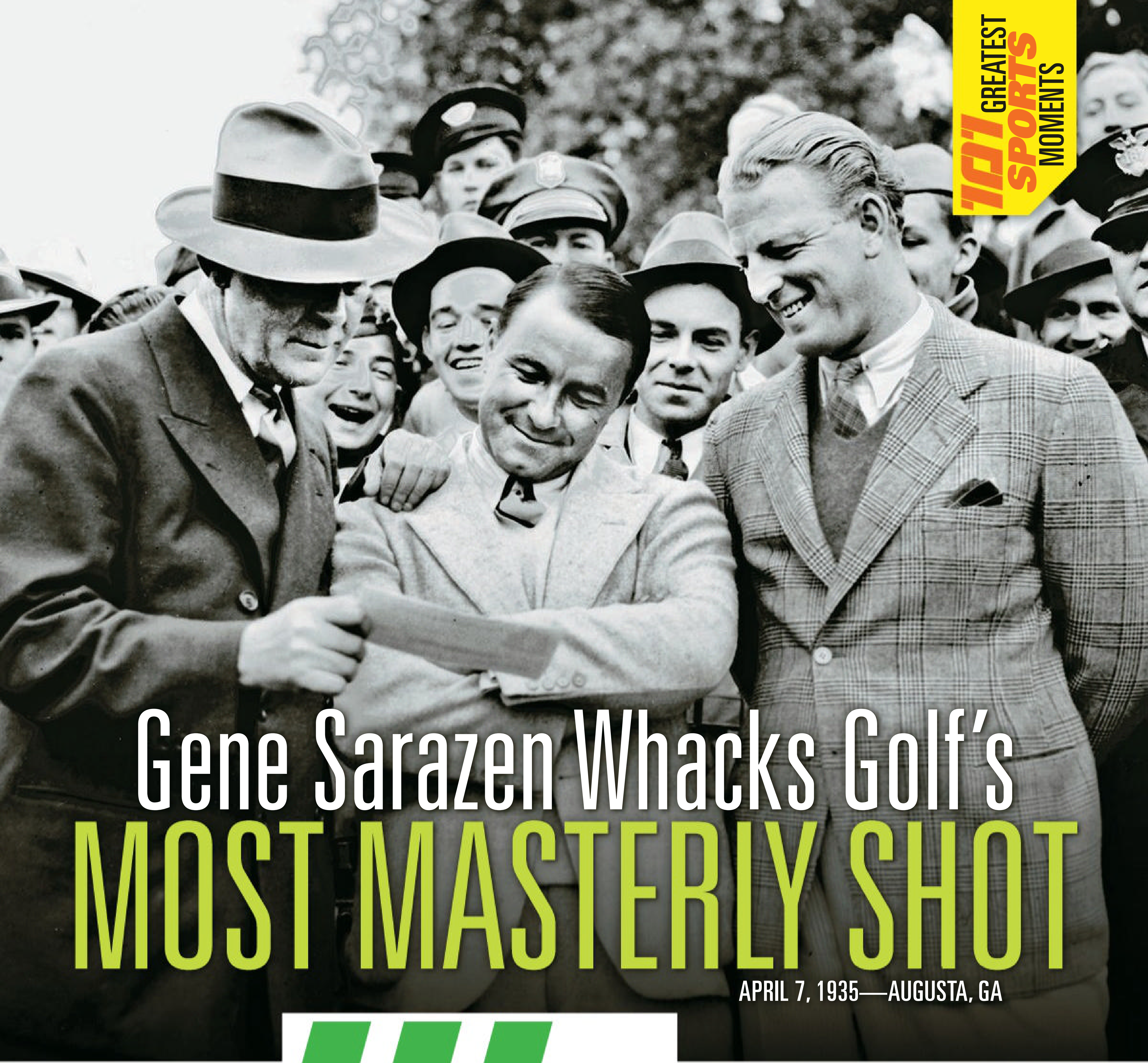
"It looks like Mears is going to catch him!" is the continual refrain among broadcasters over the final laps. And then he does. Almost.

"When we got to the finish line," Mears recalls, "I actually thought I had won it."

Johncock crosses first—by 0.16 of a second. It's the closest Indy 500 ever at the time.

"You're fighting for fractions of a second there," Mears later tells *Indianapolis Monthly* about the one that got away. "That amount of time isn't even a blink of an eye. But at the speeds you race at, that turns into footage. Half a car length, a car length—whatever it was. In my eyes, it was a mile."





Gene Sarazen Whacks Golf's MOST MASTERLY SHOT

APRIL 7, 1935—AUGUSTA, GA

74

"Would you hurry up and hit the ball already. I have a dinner to attend tonight."

Those probably aren't the exact words of Walter Hagen (aka "the father of professional golf") to his younger competitor Gene Sarazen (aka "the Squire") at the second annual Augusta National Invitation Tournament—soon to be renamed the Masters. But that's how Sarazen will retell it a lifetime later, in his 90s, to *Masters.com* when recollecting the greatest shot of his life and arguably the game.

Paired up with rival champion Hagen, Sarazen considers his caddy's 3-wood recommendation before going with the 4. No more dallying—the Haig has a dinner—he hits his second shot from 235 yards out on the par 5, 15th hole at the Augusta National Golf Club. The ball lands short, bounces onto the green and then disappears from view.

"I couldn't see it," recalls Sarazen. "All I could see were 25 people around the green all throwing their arms up. I knew something had happened. The ball was either close, or it was in."

It's the latter.

Sarazen's double eagle in the final round will tie him with tournament front-runner Craig Wood. Fewer than 30 people actually witness Gene Sarazen's "Shot Heard Round the World"—but word quickly gets out after he goes on to win the tournament the next day in a 36-hole playoff and become the first golfer to capture the Career Grand Slam.

Sarazen's shot remains the most famous in Masters history—and still the only double eagle on Augusta's 15th green, marked by a stone bridge monument. At the time, it's credited with raising golf's worldwide popularity and the timeless stature of what will come to be its most prestigious event.

'73

WILLIAMS & WILLIAMS PLAY THEIR FINAL FINALS

JAN. 28, 2017—
MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

AO
australian open
WOMEN'S SINGLES
2017 FINALIST

'72

JONNY WILKINSON SAVES HIS BEST KICK FOR LAST

NOV. 22, 2003—SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

It's England's time. It's the Northern Hemisphere's time. It's about time. That's how it's looking at halftime when the English national rugby union team, led by three penalty kicks and a setup try from star fly half Jonny Wilkinson, leads the hosting Australia Wallabies 14–5 in the 2003 Rugby World Cup Final.

Three World Cups ago in London, Australia upset hosting England 12–6 in the championship game. Twelve years later, the Red and Whites would like nothing better than to return the favor in front of a sea of 83,000 rabid Wallaby fans at Sydney's Stadium Australia.

In the second half, Australia's prolific back Elton Flatley awakens the crowd with a pair of penalty kicks, bringing the Wallabies to within three. Then in the final minute, with England pressured in their end, Flatley strikes again with his third penalty kick of the half. Now it's tied 14–14 going into extra time.

A fourth Wilkinson penalty kick makes it 17–14 for England—now less than three minutes away from hoisting the first William Webb Ellis Trophy not claimed by southerners Australia, New Zealand or South Africa. Flatley intervenes, booting yet another penalty kick to tie it up 17–17. The crowd erupts.

Less than a minute left. Regaining possession, a resilient England is in a final push, advancing into Australian territory. Wilkinson receives the ball with 26 seconds on the clock. He drop-kicks a 98-footer—with his wrong-foot—which arcs up, up, up … and right between the goalposts.

This time the score sticks. 20–17. England wins its first World Cup—on the biggest buzzer beater ever in international rugby competition.

"It's indescribable—it's something we've wanted and worked for, for so long," says an emotional Wilkinson mauled by teammates and named world player of the year. "I've been practicing this kick since I was five years old," he adds. "On both feet."

Every set of siblings has a history. When Venus Williams and Serena Williams step onto opposite ends of the court at Rod Laver Arena to decide the 2017 Australian Open champion in their ninth Grand Slam final against each other, theirs includes two decades of completely rewriting the book on women's tennis.

Collectively, the sisters have won 122 WTA singles titles, 30 Grand Slam singles championships, eight Olympic gold medals—four each (plus an extra silver for Venus)—and 14 Grand Slam doubles finals as an undefeated team.

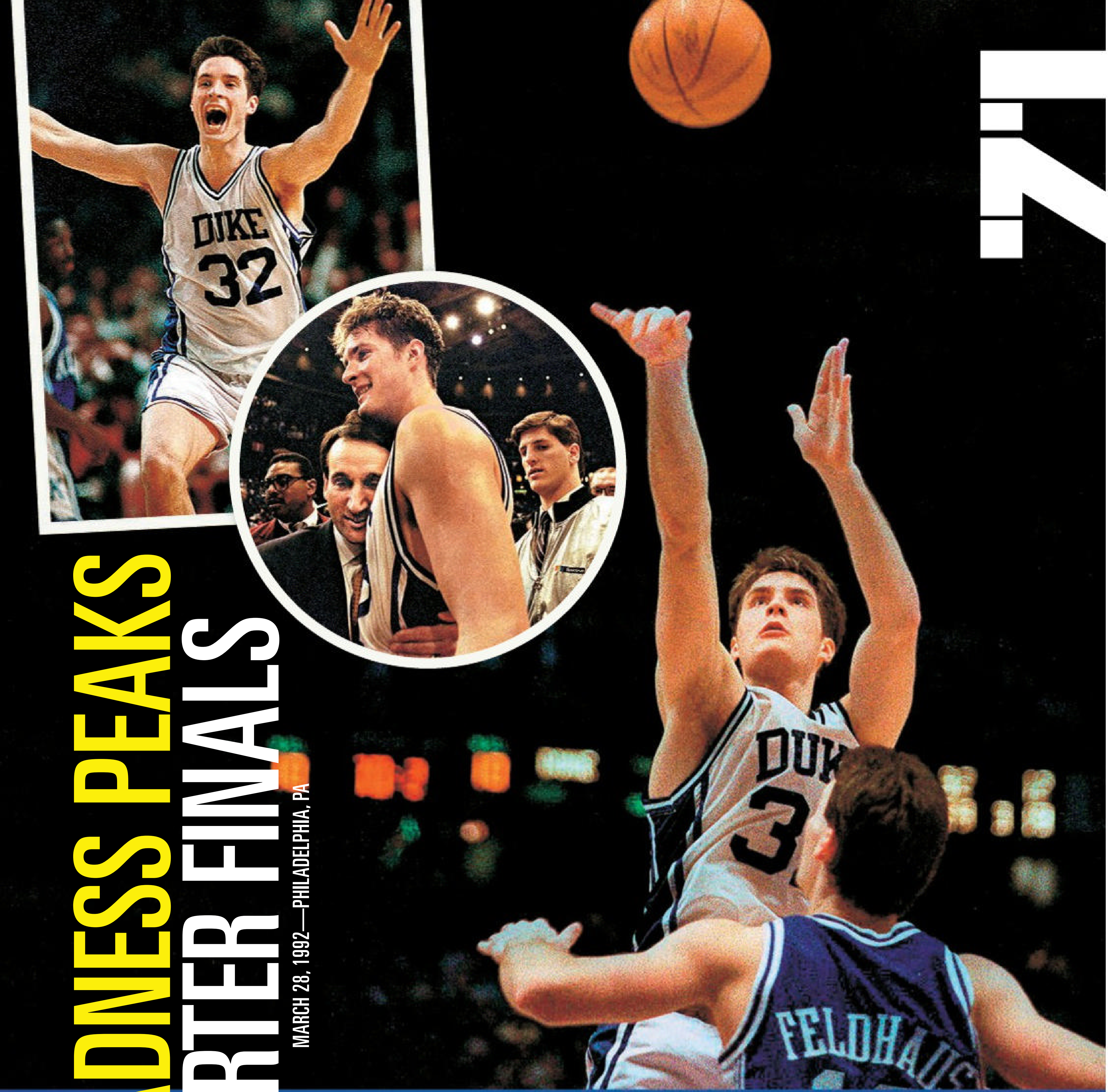
At ages 35 (Serena) and 36 (Venus), their latest center court meeting triggers more than the usual anticipation. It's their 31st professional tennis match against each other. Realistically, how much longer can this unrivaled rivalry continue? Then again, their joint trajectories are about as realistic "as one set of parents raising Picasso and Monet," says *The New York Times*. So maybe forever.

Serena has won more matches, more titles, more records, but who's counting or comparing at the moment? Whoever takes it today will be the oldest woman to ever win a Grand Slam singles title—and, as always, it's anyone's game.

Breaking the other's serve twice each in the first four games of the match, the sisters keep it as tight and unpredictable as ever—save for the usual dazzling winners, weapons-grade serves and wild rallies. After losing a close first set, Venus comes back from three break points in the second set before releasing a forehand winner that ignites the stadium. Serena holds on, closing it out 6–4, 6–4—notching her 23rd Grand Slam title, an Open Era record. And she does it (we later learn) while eight weeks pregnant.

Meeting at center court, the pair of legends ends one more Grand Slam championship with a sisterly embrace. How many more times will we be witnessing this? It turns out, this will be the last.

'92



MARCH MADNESS PEAKS IN THE QUARTERFINALS

MARCH 28, 1992—PHILADELPHIA, PA

The regionals aren't quite the Final Four in NCAA March Madness—with one exception. The 1992 East Regional Final between the No. 1 seed Duke Blue Devils and No. 2 Kentucky Wildcats might as well be the national championship.

Later tapped by *Sports Illustrated* as the greatest college basketball game of all time, the tournament's quarter-final match is stacked with hallowed All-Americans and future NBAers on both ends of the court—including Christian Laettner, Grant Hill and Bobby Hurley for Duke and Jamal Mashburn for Kentucky alongside a revered crew of Wildcat seniors dubbed "the Unforgettables." Whoever wins today is predicted to go all the way.

The defending champion Blue Devils hold a narrow lead for some of the tightest and most exciting 40 minutes of the entire tournament, which turns out to be the teaser. Tying the game up at 97 with just over a half-minute left, Kentucky takes the game into overtime.

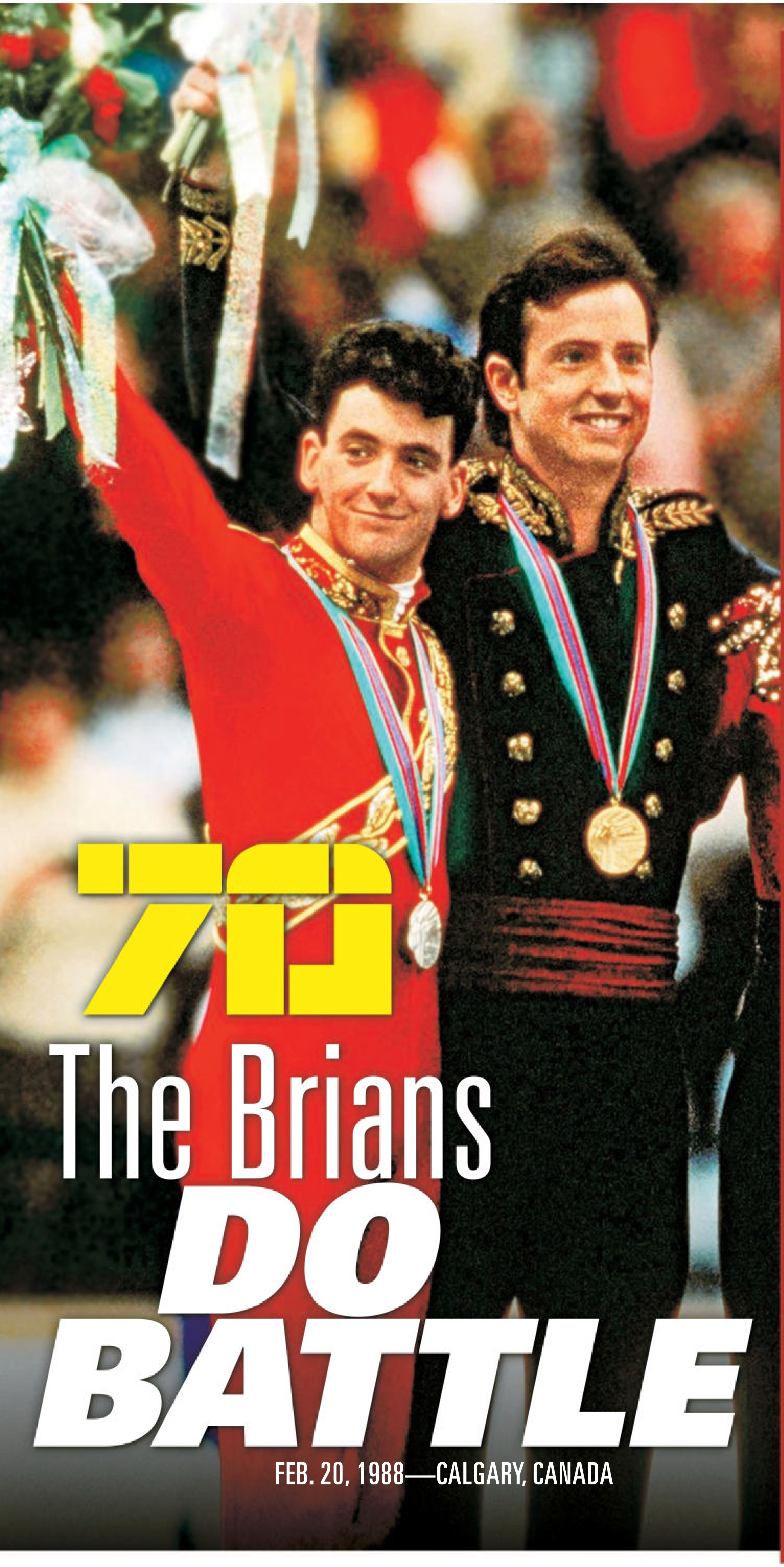
The next five minutes are a back-and-forth thrillfest, but nothing can prepare for the final sudden-death-and-resurrection 7.8 seconds. With Duke ahead 102–101, Kentucky converts a running one-hander from Sean Woods over Christian Laettner to put the Wildcats ahead 103–102. Kentucky's done it. It has to be over. The clock reads 2.1 seconds. Duke calls a time-out.

The next play called by famed Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski has never worked before in earlier attempts, but the Blue Devils have no other option. From his own end, Hill hurls a 79-yard bomb the length of the court for a reception by Laettner at the Kentucky foul line. The double-teamed center fakes right, turns left, fires a turnaround jumper—all in under 2.1 seconds.

Swish. Duke wins 104–103 at the buzzer.

Entering the Final Four, Duke will go on to win the next two rounds and claim the national championship—but this one's "the game."

1988 / COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIQUE (CIO) / MACKSON, RICHARD



70

The Brians DO BATTLE

FEB. 20, 1988—CALGARY, CANADA

Before either Brian Boitano or Brian Orser steps onto the ice in Calgary's Saddledome at the 1988 Winter Olympics, the greatest duel ever in men's figure skating—starring two athletes so evenly matched they share the same name—is a foregone conclusion.

"In the airport heading to Calgary, I see the cover of *Time* magazine on the newsstand," U.S. figure skating champion Brian Boitano will later recall. "They billed it as 'The Battle of the Brians.' I thought, 'OK, this is how they're going to sell this?' I realized it was going to be intense."

Canadian figure skating champion Brian Orser is experiencing the same intensity on the other side of the border. Maybe even a tad more. As last year's World Figure Skating Champion (Boitano won it the year before in 1986), this year's hosting country's great gold-medal hope (Boitano is the visiting U.S.'s), and a silver medalist in the '84 Winter Olympics (edging out Boitano who placed fifth), Orser is riding a nation-wide expectation that it's now his time.

"In the history of Canadian sport, there's never been one single event where there's so much pressure on one guy as there now is on Brian Orser in Calgary," notes Canadian reporter Steve Milton, coauthor of an Orser biography. "It's the first Canadian Winter Olympics. We have no gold-medal favorites in any other sport. You perform by yourself for four and a half minutes."

After the first two rounds of competition, Orser and Boitano are way ahead of the pack as expected. A capacity crowd at the Saddledome watches riveted as the virtually tied skaters perform mundane figures in the "compulsories" event like it's sudden death overtime. But that's up next.

The gold medal boils down to the long program. Fittingly, both of the battling Brians will be skating to military-themed routines.

Boitano, in a royal blue soldier's costume with gold epaulets, performs a flawless free skate with eight triple jumps and a three-and-a-half revolution triple axel—all to Carmine Coppola's "Napoleon." Orser, in crimson with gold sash, performs to Dmitri Shostakovich's "The Bolt"—nailing six triple jumps (with a hint of a stumble on one of them) followed by a planned triple axel that goes double instead.

Garnering some of the highest across-the-board scores ever received, including the only perfect 6.0 of the event from a single judge (to Orser, for artistic expression), the two skaters are still virtually tied—but not quite.

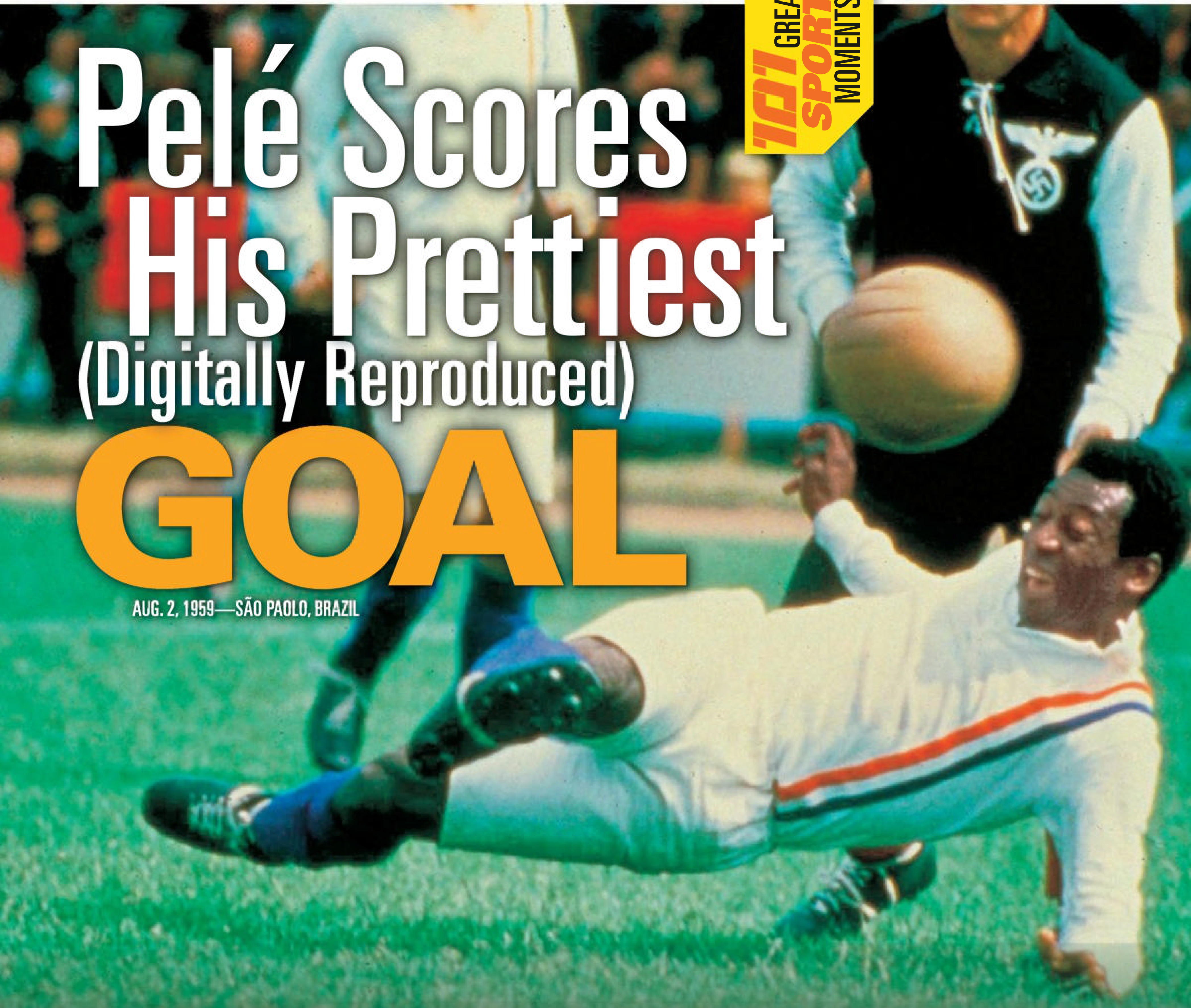
"I felt I had done it," Orser later says.

Orser hasn't quite done it. He settles for the silver once again, trailing Boitano by a tenth of a point—on technical marks.

"I consider this victory a medal for all of America," says Boitano, wearing one of just two golds won by the U.S. this Olympics.

Pelé Scores His Prettiest (Digitally Reproduced) GOAL

AUG. 2, 1959—SÃO PAOLO, BRAZIL



Unlike those unbelievable but unassailable Messi, Ronaldo and Schweinsteiger highlight reels you can watch whenever, no actual footage exists for what Pelé describes as the most stunning goal of his career.

What we now have is a digital reproduction of it commissioned by Pelé himself—a precise animated rendering of how it all went down over 60 years ago when the forefather of soccer phenoms was an 18-year-old prodigy playing for Brazil's Club Santos with a six-goal World Cup title already under his belt.

Scored in the final minutes of play at Rua Javai Stadium in a game against local São Paulo rival Juventus, the goal has a tightly defended Pelé feinting two players in the Juventus zone by chipping the ball over each of their heads in quick succession. Then, in the next instant, he performs the same stunt a third time on the goalkeeper before lightly heading the ball into an open net. During that entire sequence, the ball doesn't touch the ground once.

If this was just the video game footage it resembles, it would seem far-fetched—even for Xbox Pelé. The aftermath sounds pretty over-the-top too. According to Pelé, his incredible goal sends opposing Juventus players flocking to the young player to congratulate him while opposing fans wildly applaud the greatest thing they've ever witnessed on a soccer field or anywhere else.

Did this really happen? Some suspect that the great Pelé, now in his 80s, is amping those 1950s glory days—or just perhaps remembering them a tad too generously.

It happened exactly like the fake version depicts, defends Olaf Peter Jensen in *Box to Box Football*. Corroborating evidence comes from every other firsthand source besides Pelé himself—including 21 players on the pitch that day, several spectators attending the game, and the journalist and photographer from *O Estado de S. Paulo* newspaper who reported on this very goal taking place.

"With many of his fans and contemporaries vanishing into the obituary columns, there are few people left to defend Pelé's achievements as they are eaten away by Messi and Ronaldo," writes Jensen. "Many of us find it difficult to imagine the half-remembered, black-and-white, samba-and-favelas stories of Pelé as anything other than onanistic exaggeration. But Pelé really was capable of these feats of football wizardry."

Let's give him this.

THE KLAMMER EXPRESS GOES OFF THE RAILS FOR THE GOLD

FEB. 5, 1976—INNSBRUCK, AUSTRIA

Ask any Austrian in the winter of 1976. Franz Klammer is already a lock for the greatest, fastest, gutsiest downhill competitor of all time when the hometown hero they call The Kaiser lines up for his epic Olympic run at the Innsbruck Winter Games. Having won his last three consecutive World Cup races (and eight out of nine the prior year), the 22-year-old is the clear favorite in his first Olympic bid.

Drawing the dreaded bib No. 15 out of 15 skiers, Klammer will be speeding down 3,020-meter Patscherkofel last—on a course shredded into a tilted ice rink by every preceding racer. His rival, Swiss defending Olympic champion Berhnhard Russi, having raced in optimal third position, has clocked a lead time of 1:46.06. Klammer is up.

"By the time I walk into the starting gate, I know I am going to win," Klammer claims in a later interview. "I'm convinced I can do it. But I know I have to risk everything—and do something special to take this."

Pushing off in his canary yellow suit and signature white-striped red helmet, Klammer whizzes down a thoroughly beaten-up route—trailing Russi by a hair at the 1,000-meter split. It's risk-every-thing-and-do-something-special time.

"So, at this point, I change my line completely," says Klammer.

Straying from the carved path, Klammer creates his own die-hard route—risking it all to shave fractions of a second. It's the edgiest, scariest downhill performance the world has ever witnessed with one hand covering its face. Several times, Klammer rights himself before wiping out at over 100 kilometers per hour on clattering skis.

"I thought I was going to crash all the way," he later tells *Olympics.com*. "I gave myself terrible frights."

The payoff: Whizzing past the finish line at 1:45.73, he beats Russi's time by 33 hundredths of a second in front of 60,000 adoring fans, with the rest of Austria dancing around their TV sets.

"The whole mountain was shaking when Franz came down," recalls Russi, one of the first to congratulate his competitor on the most chilling gold medal run in history. "He skied a line in the final pitch which everybody said is just impossible—no one can stand this. And he just did it. I became kind of a fan of Franz."

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67

TUFF HEDEMAN HANGS ON TO *BODACIOUS THE BULL*

FALL 1993—
LONG BEACH, CA

No bull in rodeo history is as terrifying and outright avoided by otherwise dauntless riders as Bodacious.

Cut to the '93 Bull Riders Only Finals at L.A.'s Long Beach Convention Center: When legendary bull rider Tuff Hedeman randomly draws Bodacious for a third time—after failing twice before to reach the required eight seconds—three times is the charm during rodeo's boldest ride in the books. Exploding out of the chute, Hedeman hangs on to his ferocious host for a 95-point performance that judges later confess should have been a perfect 100. It's the ride of the five-time world champion's career—but Hedeman and Bodacious aren't quite done with each other.

Two years later at the PBR World Finals in Las Vegas, Hedeman draws Bodacious yet again. This time he takes a vicious backward skull butt from the bull early in the ride, fracturing nearly every bone in his face and silencing a horrified crowd at the MGM Grand Arena.

Recovering in just two months, Hedeman is back in action at the National Finals Rodeo—and guess which bull he's paired up with in the fifth round. Hedeman takes a pass. Holding a promise to his son to decline if fate plays its hand, he lets Bo leap out of the chute riderless.

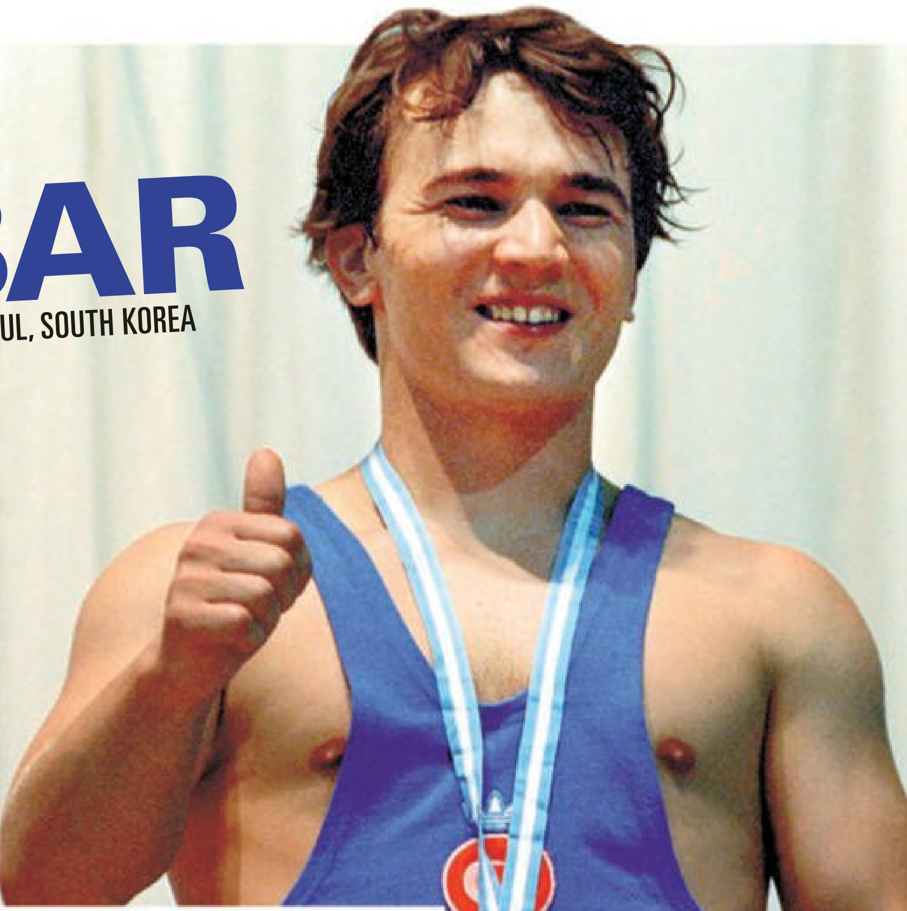
Soon after, Bodacious will be retired from rodeo after another frightening "face incident" with a rider later that day—before being inducted into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame, making guest appearances at state fairs and being featured on Fox TV's *Guinness World Records Prime Time*. In May 2000, Bodacious will peacefully pass on.

"All I'll say is this—I'm still here and he's not," a retired Hedeman later quips to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* when asked about his life and times with rodeo's meanest bull ever. "Bodacious won the battle," notes the riding legend, "but I won the war—maybe."

66

TURKEY'S HERCULES RAISES THE BAR

SEPT. 20, 1988—SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA



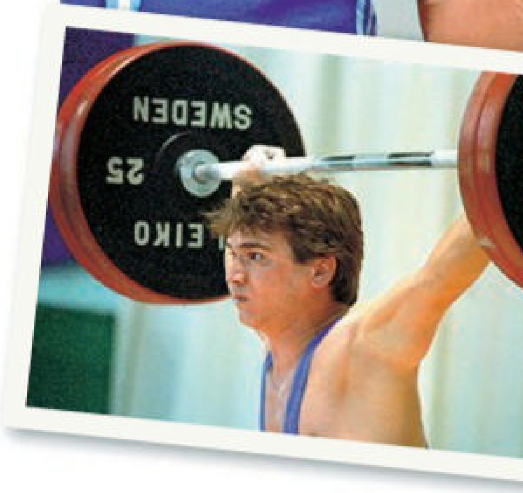
In a single eye-bulging, mouth-gaping moment at the '88 Summer Games in Seoul, amidst a sea of waving Turkish flags, Naim Süleymanoğlu raises many things at once. Among them: Olympic weightlifter stature (straight to the cover of *Time*); the cachet of sub-five-foot guys; and Turkey's place as the rightful home of the strongest pound-for-pound guy on Earth.

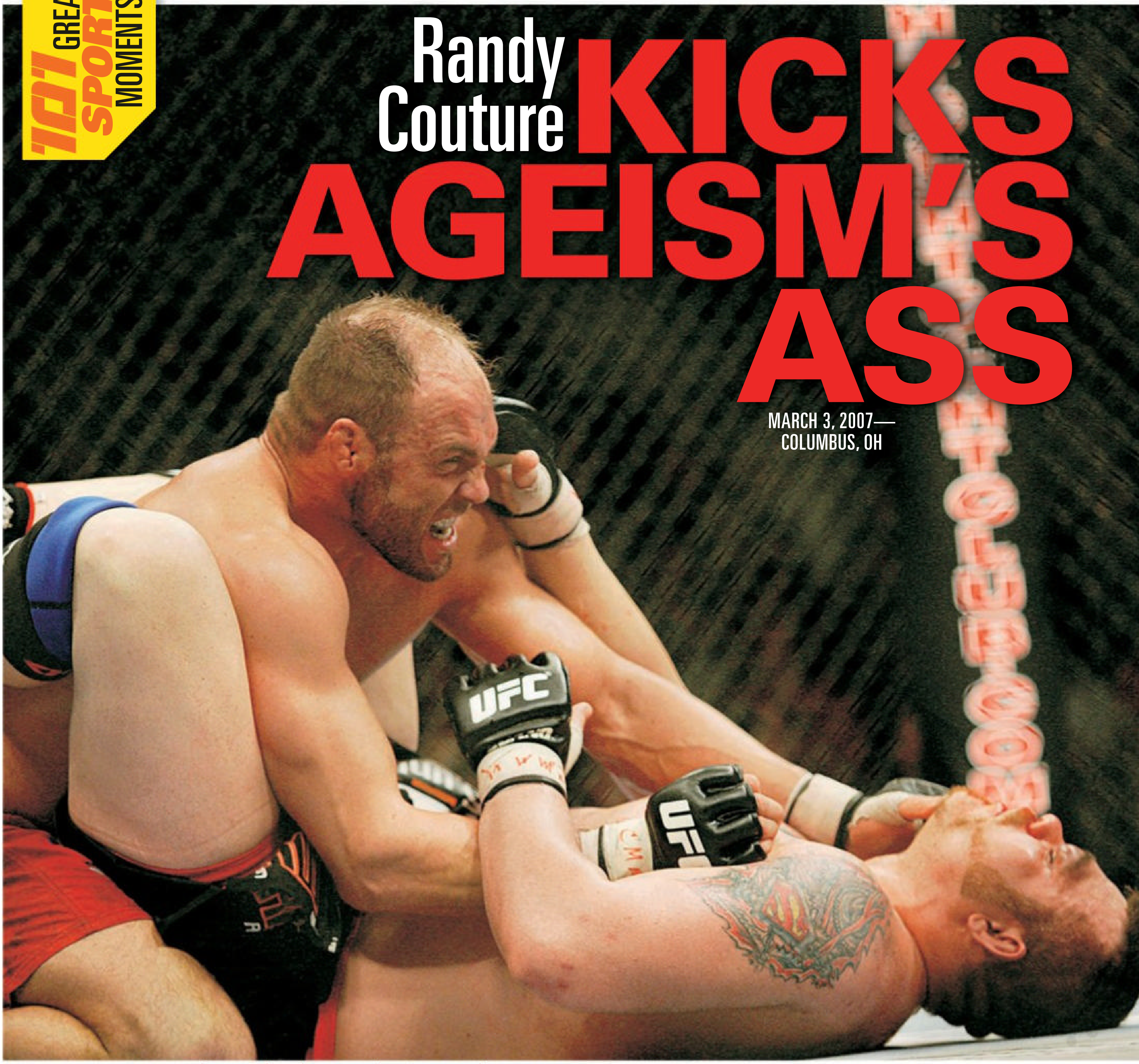
Standing at a compact 4'10" and 130 pounds, the 21-year-old, cherub-faced Bulgarian-born weightlifter with Turkish roots raises 190 kg above his head on his third and final clean and jerk lift. That's 3.15 times his own bodyweight—a world record in his featherweight class and an unprecedented human lifting ratio.

Setting his first world record at age 15, Süleymanoğlu (aka "Pocket Hercules") has been training from age 10 for this moment. Prior to his first Olympics, his thriller novel-worthy defection to Turkey involves a reported $1.5 million payoff to Bulgaria to allow the weightlifter to compete under his chosen flag at the Seoul Games—where he'll win the gold and set three world records. Over the next decade, he'll claim seven more World Weightlifting titles and win three more Olympic golds, tallying nearly 50 world records by his retirement.

Süleymanoğlu's final Olympic performance during the '96 Olympics in Atlanta will set the stage for the most exciting weightlifting duel ever—against Valerios Leonidis of Greece. Clearing out the rest of the competition, the Turkish and Greek juggernauts trade three straight world-record lifts in front of a politically fueled crowd, before Turkey's Hercules bests Greece's with a 187.5-kg lift.

"You have just witnessed the greatest weightlifting competition in history," notes commentator Ken Jones of *The Independent*.





Randy Couture KICKS AGEISM'S ASS

MARCH 3, 2007—
COLUMBUS, OH

@RECKLESS_RODEO_MAMA ON INSTAGRAM

65

When 43-year-old mixed martial arts retiree Randy Couture announces his return to the Octagon to face 30-year-old Tim "The Maniac" Sylvia in a bid to win the UFC heavyweight belt for a record third time, a more lifelike ending to the old David and Goliath tale is all but guaranteed.

"Randy's coming out of retirement because he thinks he's still 30 years old, which he's not," says 6'8", 265-pound reigning champion Sylvia—towering above Couture by six inches, with about 50 pounds on his compact challenger and nearly a foot longer reach. "He's out of his prime."

UFC luminaries aren't quite as polite, simply calling the former fighting legend out of his mind. A swift and ugly annihilation is predicted.

During a lopsided fight that middle-aged MMA fans unanimously point to as the most inspiring ever, Couture proceeds to crush his massive opponent. Right after the opening bell at a packed UFC 68 event in Ohio, he instantly drops Sylvia with a giant overhanded right, then dominates through five rounds of multiple takedowns and one-sided kickboxing exchanges. As the fight winds down, the exhausted, overmatched defending champion can barely open his eyes or lift his arms.

By unanimous decision, Randy Couture is named the oldest UFC Heavyweight Champion ever—and receives a gracious apology afterward from Sylvia for earlier jabs about his age.

"Not bad for an old man, huh?" says Couture, who'll keep swinging for another four years before announcing his final retirement at age 47.

64 Texas Western STARTS THE BALL ROLLING

MARCH 19, 1966—COLLEGE PARK, MD

Bobby Joe Hill. Orsten Artis. Willie Worsley. Harry Flournoy. David Lattin.

The five starters for the Texas Western Miners in the 1966 NCAA University Division Championship Game are on the court for only one reason in the eyes of their single-minded coach Don Haskins. They're the best players on the team. They stand the best chance of taking a small program from El Paso as far as it can go during one of the most odds-defying runs ever in Division I basketball.

The fact that they're the first-ever all-Black starting lineup in an NCAA title game will echo beyond college basketball in 1966, just two years after the Civil Rights Act.

Texas Western's 23–1 record against white teams in the Midwest Division prior to their national championship run has happened largely out of the spotlight. So have all the racially infused insults, threats and worse that the team has been subjected to throughout the season. The rise of the Miners' "fabulous five" will swiftly gain more attention during the tournament after dramatic overtime and double-overtime wins in the regional playoffs and a decisive semifinal victory against Utah.

The NCAA Final held on March 19 at 10 p.m. on the University of Maryland, College Park campus bears no resemblance to future March Madness. On the Cole Field House court, Texas Western's starting five face an all-white, top-seeded Kentucky team on a court officiated by white refs, attended by over 14,000 white fans, and viewed (a day later on tape delay) by a country still widely steeped in segregated athletics. There's at least one Confederate flag in the back row at the game, waving during Kentucky baskets.

But the game itself is an instant revelation—in its normalcy.

"We were more 'white-oriented' than any of the other teams in the Final Four," recalls Texas Western guard Willie Worsley, as reported by ESPN, addressing the commonly held prejudice that an all-Black lineup would lack defense and control. "We played the most intelligent, the most boring, the most disciplined game of them all."

"It was a violent game," Kentucky forward Pat Riley of future L.A. Lakers coaching fame will later recall. "I don't mean there were any fights. But they were desperate and they were committed and they were more motivated than we were."

The Miners take an early lead when top scorer Bobby Joe Hill converts a pair of consecutive steals from both Wildcat guards into easy layups within the span of a minute. Texas Western will never relinquish it, winning 72–65 in the tournament's most reverberating victory—featuring much less noise than future Final Four finales and far more impact.

It happens almost immediately. By the following year, major colleges across the country begin actively recruiting Black student athletes onto their basketball rosters while dispensing with unofficial quotas. It was a game that "changed the sport forever," notes *Sports Illustrated*. "And maybe changed a nation as well."

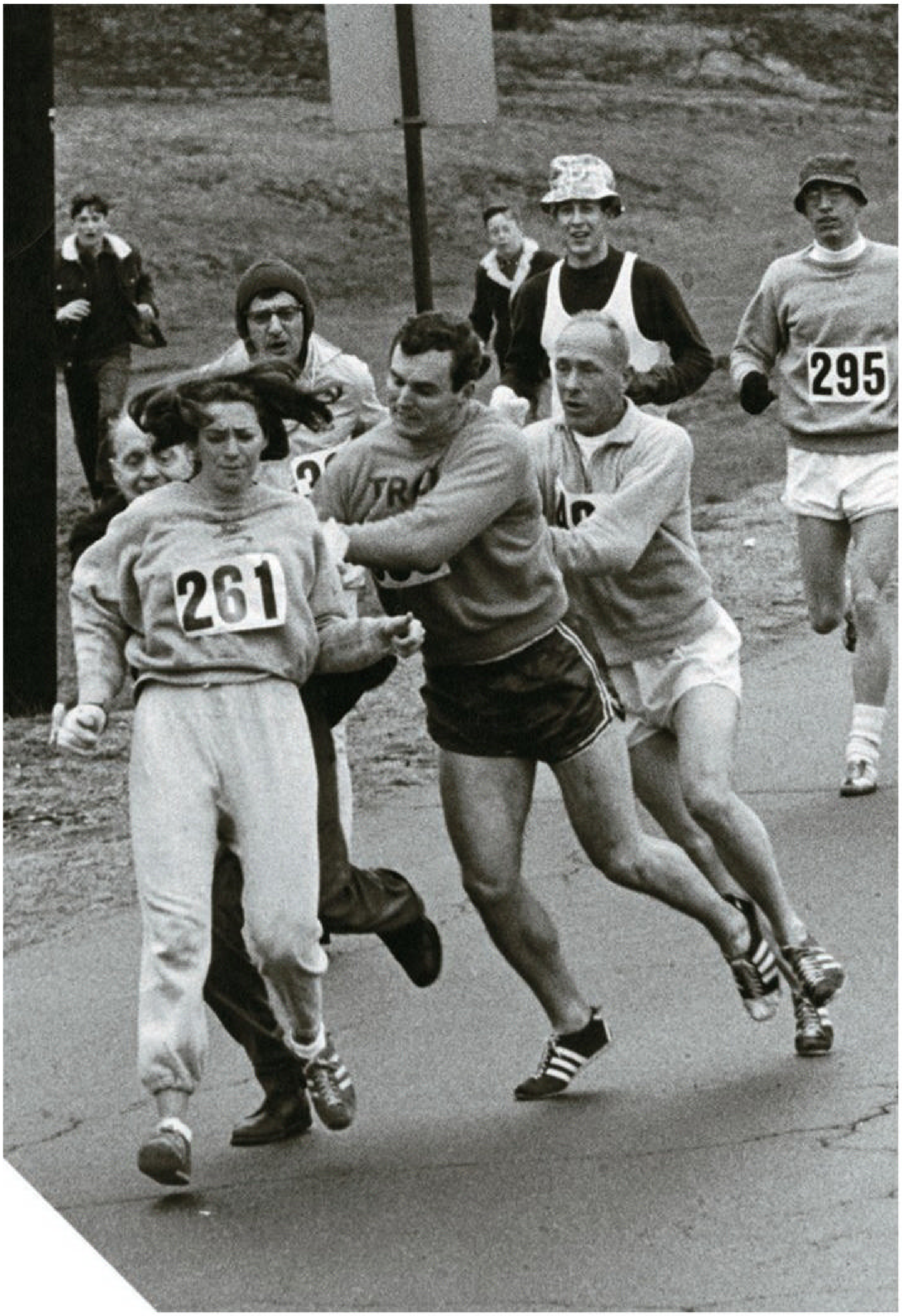
"I certainly did not expect to be some racial pioneer, but I'm happy to be a part of that," writes Haskins, who'll coach the team for 38 seasons and pen the movie-adapted autobiography *Glory Road*, about his seminal championship year. "If we'd finished second," he adds, "it wouldn't have happened so quick."

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
WELCOME
TEXAS WESTERN

63

KATHRYN SWITZER LIBERATES THE BOSTON MARATHON

APRIL 19, 1967—BOSTON, MA



It's just a given in 1967 that the Boston Marathon is for men only. The reason? Women are physiologically incapable of running 26 miles, explains a Boston athletic director. The Amateur Athletic Union, which oversees the world's most famous marathon corroborates this by declaring that women can't compete in AAU-sanctioned races over a mile and a half.

Meanwhile, logging big miles at the University of Syracuse with the men's track team (because there's no women's track team), journalism student Kathryn Switzer tells her running coach that she wants to run Boston anyway—as retold in her memoir, *Marathon Woman*.

"No dame ever ran the Boston Marathon!" he barks back. "If any woman could do it, you could, but you'd have to prove it to me."

She proves it—running him into the ground on a 26.2-miler (with five more miles tacked on for good measure). Signing up as "K. V. Switzer," she becomes the first woman to officially (and undetectably) register for the Boston Marathon. Altering history isn't at the top of her list quite yet.

"I wasn't running Boston to prove anything," Switzer writes. "I was just a kid who wanted to run her first marathon."

Cut to noon on a cold, dreary Patriots' Day, 20-year-old K. Switzer No. 261 sets off from Hopkinton, MA, in a gray sweatshirt and lipstick among a sea of 740 mainly oblivious male runners. There are some double takes. Mainly smiles and Henny Youngman–esque words of encouragement: "It's a girl!"… "Can you get my wife to run?"

At mile four, Switzer is suddenly attacked by an apparent madman clad in an overcoat, felt hat—and Boston Athletic Association ribbon.

"Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers!" says 63-year-old, longtime Boston Marathon manager Jock Semple. It's with a sense of deranged duty that the iconic race organizer grabs Switzer by the shirt and attempts to claw off her race bib to immediately disqualify her—before he's tackled to the ground by Switzer's college football player boyfriend running with her.

Switzer presses on for the next 22 miles, feeling "puke-ish" amidst a swirl of conflicting emotions—but mainly pushed by an overriding resolve to just keep running. "If I quit," she writes, "it would set women's sports back instead of forward. If I quit, I'd never run Boston. If I quit, Jock Semple and all those like him would win. My fear and humiliation turned to anger."

After four hours and twenty minutes, Switzer crosses the finish line. Making Boston history and inadvertent headlines, she'll go on to champion women's inclusion in marathon running worldwide. The Boston Marathon will officially be open to women in 1972—of many more to follow.

62

NIKI LAUDA RESTARTS HIS ENGINE

SEPT. 12, 1976—MONZA, ITALY

It's looking like another stellar year for Niki Lauda. Fresh off his first Formula One world championship in 1975, the 27-year-old Austrian driver is cleaning up in the 1976 F1 season with four wins in his first six races and second place in the other two.

Firing up his Ferrari on Aug. 1 at the German Grand Prix in Nüburgring, Lauda has twice the points of his closest competitor, British archrival James Hunt. He's a lock for the first back-to-back F1 title in over 15 years—until the second lap of the race. Hitting a fast left kink and swerving off the track, Lauda's car hits an embankment and bursts into flames with the driver trapped in the wreckage.

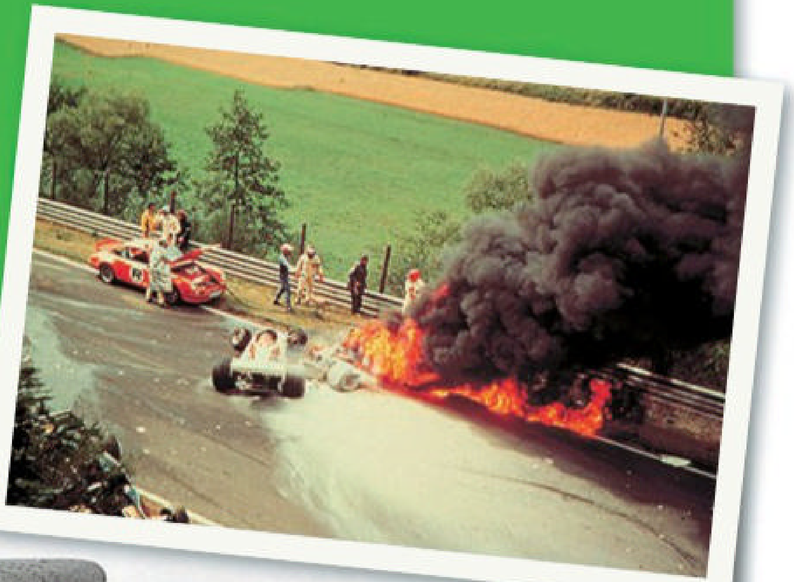
Miraculously, Lauda is pulled out of the car alive, with life-threatening burns and toxic gases torching his lungs. Lapsing into a coma at the hospital, Lauda is read his last rites.

Forty-one days later, having missed only two races, Lauda is suiting up for the Italian Grand Prix in Monza. The right side of his head is scorched with open scars. His eyelids are gone, and so is most of his right ear. His lungs are wrecked. Changing blood-soaked head bandages, Lauda excruciatingly squeezes on an adapted helmet, climbs into his next Ferrari and gets on with it.

"It was the most terrifying weekend," Lauda will recall, about rejoining the pack at Monza against every doctor's advice. "But for me it was pretty simple. I had to accept it—and that was it for me. Live today and think of tomorrow."

Losing position early in the race, Lauda fights through unbearable pain, visual impairment, fried nerves and wretched driving conditions (rain) for a racer who can no longer blink. Despite it all, he starts passing cars, and then more cars. Pulling out of midfield and into the front of the pack, Lauda crosses the finish line fourth—but otherwise winning it as far as the roaring Autodromo crowd is concerned.

Competing through the rest of the season, Lauda will narrowly lose the title to Hunt before reclaiming it the following year for his second of three world championships. After dismissing the most courageous comeback in F1 history as "just life," he'll race for another decade.



GOODYEAR
Marlboro

61

Justin Tucker KICKS A DOUBLE-SIX

SEPT. 26, 2021—DETROIT, MI

60

Fourth quarter. Three seconds on the clock. 17–16 the score. The visiting Baltimore Ravens are on their last down at midfield, trailing by a point to the generally jinxed Detroit Lions. It's do-or-die field goal attempt time. But not just any field goal.

Trotting onto the gridiron at Ford Field with 49 straight successful kicks behind him, including three earlier in the game, Ravens placekicker Justin Tucker has to boot a 66-yarder this time. It would be the longest field goal in NFL history.

In the last 50 years, only 20 placekickers have broken the 60-yard field goal barrier. Tucker—a Pro Bowler and the only kicker to ever grace an NFL Top 100 Players list—is one of them. In 2013, he squeaked a 61-yard buzzer beater through the uprights against, wouldn't you know it, the hosting Lions. Detroit had been up by a single point that time too before Tucker's right foot took them down. Another five yards out though, and the ball wouldn't have made it.

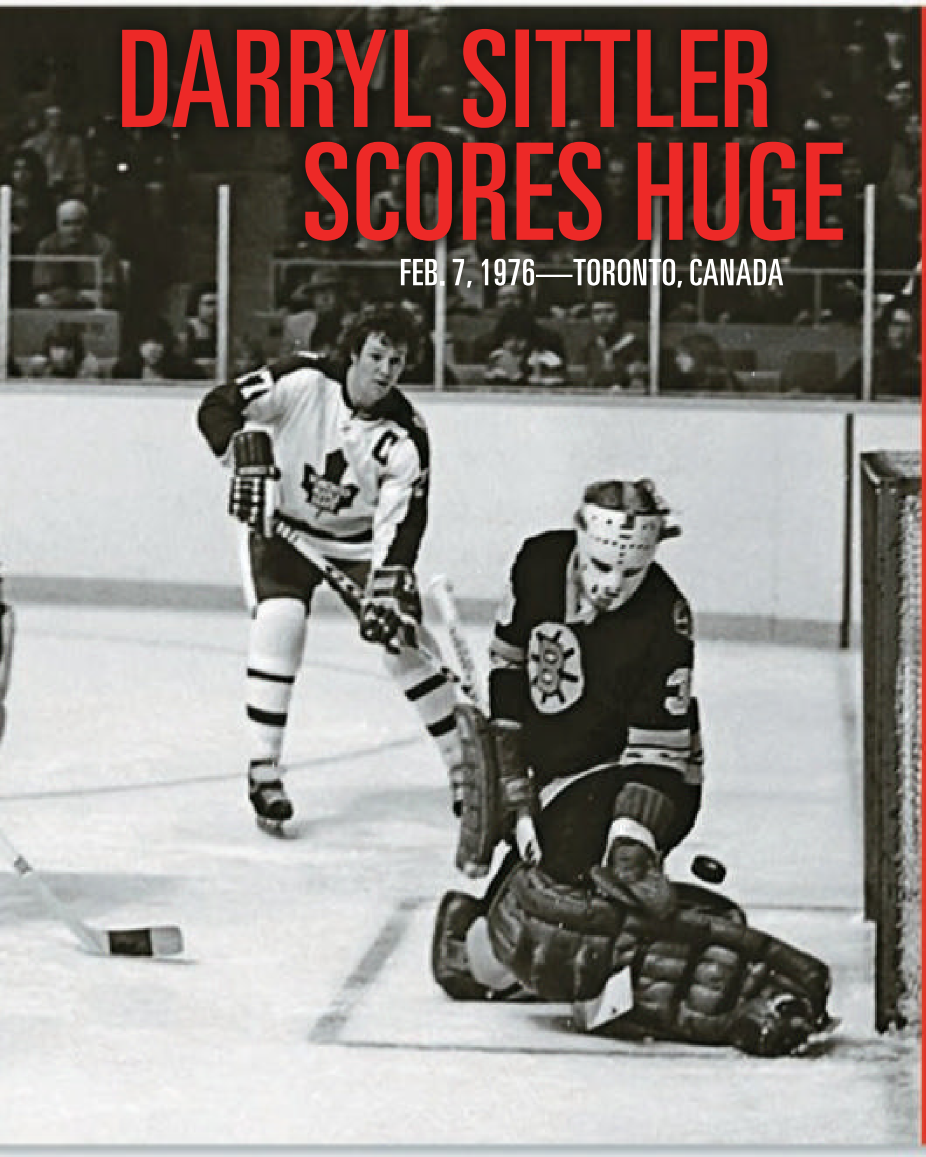
Cut to this Sunday: Here's the snap. And the kick. Now the collective, open-mouthed pause. Going, going, dropping … THUD!

Colliding with the crossbar, the football rears up and spins like a pinwheel before willing itself through the uprights—setting a new field goal distance record, securing Tucker as the greatest kicker of his era, and leaving the losing Lions to their own regurgitated thoughts.

"Man, I love Detroit," Tucker gushes in the post-game. "I'm thinking of getting a place here."

DARRYL SITTLER SCORES HUGE

FEB. 7, 1976—TORONTO, CANADA



It looks like another good thrashing is in store for the Toronto Maple Leafs—or Maple *Laughs*—as die-hard fans of the world's favorite cursed hockey team have come to know them in the 1970s and future decades.

The visiting Boston Bruins arrive at Maple Leaf Gardens on a seven-game winning streak led by some clutch goaltending from rookie netminder Dave Reece. The Leafs, meanwhile, have lost all but one of their last seven games, leading the team's crusty owner, Harold Ballard, to publicly muse whether their hugely popular captain and first-line centerman, Darryl Sittler, is up to the job.

Sittler will temporarily shut Ballard up by setting the most unbreakable NHL record by a hockey player whose last name isn't Gretzky—performing hockey's version of Wilt Chamberlain's 100-point night.

After assisting on a pair of goals in the first period, Sittler gets his first hat trick of the game before collecting two more assists in the second period. With one more period to go, he's suddenly just a point away from tying the NHL's eight-point single-game record set 32 years ago by Montreal Canadiens legend Maurice "Rocket" Richard.

"There's a buzz in the dressing room during the second intermission," Sittler's linemate Lanny McDonald later recalls to *NHL.com* about his fellow future Hall of Famer being just a single point shy of the Rocket's unbreakable record.

Forty-four seconds into the third period, Sittler dekes past the Bruins defense and scores his fourth goal of the game. Nine minutes later, he blasts a record-setting wrist shot into the net, followed by one more with a few minutes left in the game. His final point tally for the night: six goals and four assists in an 11–4 win over Boston.

Nearly half a century later, Sittler's remarkable 10-point performance has outlasted the careers of every subsequent hockey superstar—many of whom have reached the old eight-point yardstick, but no further.

"Every year that goes by, the magnitude of the achievement gets bigger and means more to me," says a long-retired Sittler. "I hope it lasts."

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ICC CRICKET WORLD CUP 2019

58

KAWHI LEONARD LENDS TORONTO SOME BOUNCE

MAY 12, 2019—TORONTO, CANADA

Singling out the greatest short-term acquisition ever made in NBA history would be a tougher task before Kawhi Leonard's brief tenure happens with the Toronto Raptors in the 2018–19 season. It takes the former San Antonio Spur and future Los Angeles Clipper just 60 games to provide an NBA title for one of the most championship-starved cities in sports.

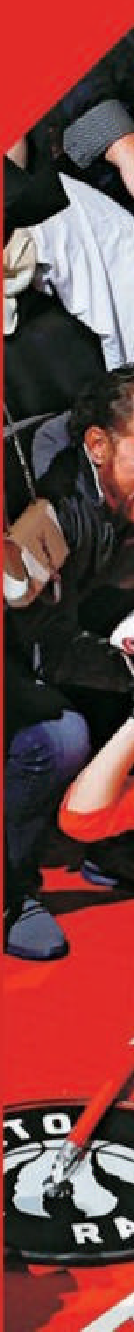
Along the way, Leonard's 732-point tally in the 2019 playoffs becomes the third-highest-ever in a single NBA postseason (and first, excluding LeBron James and Michael Jordan). But it's his final shot of a grinding conference finals against the Philadelphia 76ers that makes instant league and Canadian history.

With the score tied and 4.2 seconds left on the clock in a deciding Game 7, Leonard is fed the ball just inside half-court. Speeding to the opposite corner while double-teamed, he heaves a baseline jumper over seven-foot forward Joel Embiid's fingertips with three tenths of a second on the clock.

A capacity crowd in Toronto waits… and waits… and waits some more—while a slo-mo, high-arcing ball bounces off the rim at the buzzer.

And bounces twice… three times…

After four bounces on every inch of the hoop, the ball drops in to become the NBA's first-ever Game 7 buzzer-beater and Toronto's first happy ending since Joe Carter's World Series–winning homer for the Blue Jays over a quarter century ago.



CRICKET'S WORLD CUP GOES OVER THE TOP

JULY 14, 2019—LONDON, ENGLAND

The championship game of the 2019 ICC Cricket World Cup is expected to be a tight match between two teams already tied for the most frustrating records in international competition. New Zealand needs to win this one to avoid becoming only the third country ever to lose two consecutive World Cup finals. England has choked in more final matches than any other team in One Day International World Cup history. Another loss for this year's host at Lord's Cricket Ground in London will make England the Buffalo Bills of ODI cricket. Neither team has ever won it.

After battling past tough semifinal matches against Australia and India, respectively, England and New Zealand will fight out the wildest World Cup title game likely to ever happen.

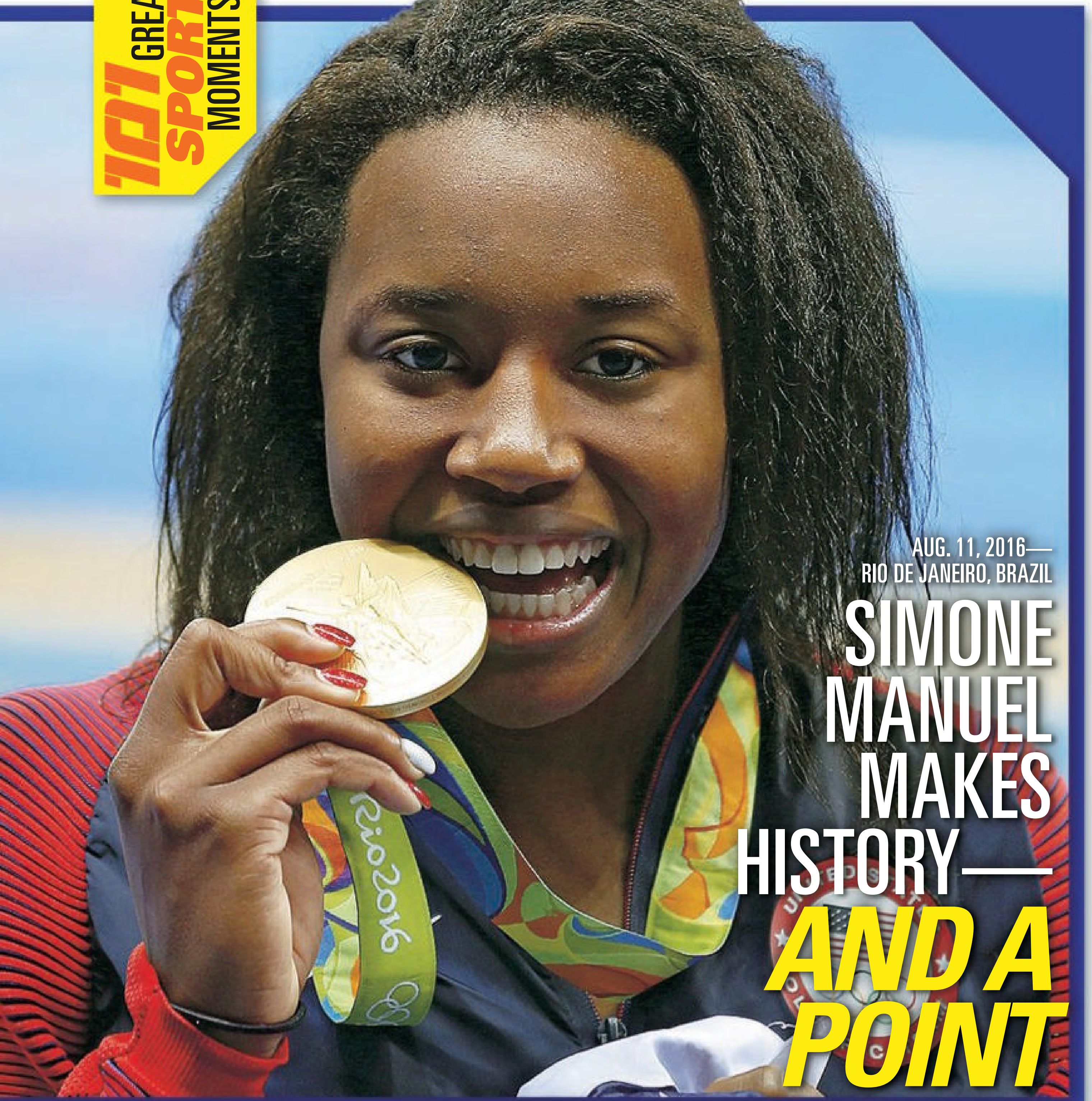
At mid-match, New Zealand's 241 runs look like enough to best a slow-starting England before a clutch rally led by star batsmen Ben Stokes and Jos Buttler tightens the game. Tying it up on final deliveries, England pushes the match into the first Super Over in ODI history.

The teams then play to a further unprecedented 15–15 Super Over draw—ending super dramatically with New Zealand's Martin Guptill being run out after scrambling for the win. Now what?

For the first and last time ever, the World Cup final resorts to an arcane (and now discontinued) boundary countback rule which hands England their first ever title after the closest possible ODI cricket match ever.

"That is the most amazing game—" says the live commentator for *The Guardian*, "…that I have ever seen in my entire life."

WE THE NORTH
Sixers
21
RAPTORS
2
RAPTORS
23
PLAYOFFS
WE THE NORTH



AUG. 11, 2016—
RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

SIMONE MANUEL MAKES HISTORY— *AND A POINT*

57

Every hundredth counts when you're breaking Olympic world records and cultural barriers in 52.70 seconds flat.

During a back-from-behind thriller, American swimmer Simone Manuel simultaneously does both at the Rio Summer Games. Setting a new world record in the women's 100-meter freestyle (by 0.01 seconds), the 20-year-old, debuting Olympian also becomes the first African-American woman to win an individual event in Olympic swimming.

"The gold medal isn't just for me—it's for people who came before me and inspired me to stay in the sport," says Manuel, who shares the win and record in a tie with Canada's Penny Oleksiak. "I hope I'm an inspiration to others to get out there and try swimming," she adds.

Manuel's words may also allude to "a particular, fraught history that follows Black Americans and swimming," notes NPR in a later interview with Jeff Wiltse, author of *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, which explores racial segregation's discouragement of Blacks from water sports.

According to a recent USA Swimming study, nearly 70 percent of African-Americans say they can't swim—a disparity stretching to racial imbalances on U.S. Olympic swim teams.

"That's why when Manuel won gold Thursday night, she isn't just an athlete excelling at her sport," says NPR. "She's a symbol for what should have been self-evident all along: Swimming is for everyone."

56 ERIK WEIHENMAYER CLIMBS EVEREST

MAY 25, 2001—MOUNT EVEREST, NEPAL

Any journey to the 29,032-foot summit of the world's highest mountain is a staggering feat. At last count, over 6,100 people have done it since Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay became the first to set foot atop Mount Everest on May 29, 1953. Among many historic and triumphant climbs since then, one of them simply blows our mind.

Erik Weihenmayer's arrival at a crowded Everest Base Camp with the National Federation of the Blind-Allegra 2001 Expedition is the biggest news of spring climbing season at the Himalayan peak—and there are no shortage of hushed discussions among other expeditions that it's likely going to turn *epic* (i.e., tragic). An accomplished rock and ice climber, the 32-year-old, Colorado-based former schoolteacher and wrestling coach aims to become the first blind person to reach the highest point on Earth.

"I've dreamed about Everest since I began climbing—and it's almost beyond my imagination just being here, experiencing the mountain for myself," writes Weihenmayer, who was robbed of his vision from retinoschisis as a kid. He now plans to make the summit of Everest his fifth stop in a bid to climb all Seven Summits—the highest peaks on each continent.

After two years of preparation and training, the dedicated NFB team follows the classic Southeast Ridge route up Everest from Nepal—starting with several trips along the dreaded Khumbu Icefall, a treacherous labyrinth of moving ice and gaping crevasses crossed by a rickety ladder system.

"It's the most difficult part of the whole mountain—a living beast and an ever-changing landscape as huge chunks of ice, the size of school buses, calve off and shatter below," describes Weihenmayer, who'll take 13 hours to cross it the first time. Over the course of the climb, he'll traverse the Khumbu Icefall 10 times, eventually shaving it down to just five hours. But this is barely the beginning of the ascent.

After waiting out poor upper mountain conditions during a narrow climbing window in May, Weihenmayer and the team plod through endless challenges above—gaping glacial valleys of the Western Cwm, steep verticals of the Lhotse face leading up into the oxygen-starved Death Zone of the South Col—where, far above still, a knife-edge ridge snakes between the dual abysses of Nepal and Tibet to an elusive summit hiding somewhere ahead.

Weihenmayer makes it, becoming the first blind person to climb to the top of Mount Everest. And then he makes it back down again. That's important too.

"Could a blind man ever summit Everest—jumping over the many small crevasses by measuring the distance with his climbing poles and crossing the gaping ones using as many as seven ladders strung together?" Weihenmayer's father, Ed, will later write in a letter to *Time* magazine, where the climber will soon find himself on the cover. "Could a blind man ever be in the condition necessary to endure more than two months on the world's biggest mountain, and have the stamina to hang in there through fierce storms and frigid cold? Never say never!"

Two climbs later, Weihenmayer will complete his Seven Summits push before notching more wild dreams ahead—including kayaking 277 miles of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon and co-founding No Barriers, a global nonprofit dedicated to helping people with challenges lead their best lives. The org's motto: "What's within you is stronger than what's in your way."

Mine That Bird TURNS ON THE JETS

MAY 2, 2009—
LOUISVILLE, KY

55

After bouncing between numerous owners in Canada and the U.S., Mine That Bird barely qualifies as also-ran fodder when trainer Chip Woolley enters the 2-year-old gelding into the most famous horse race on the planet, more or less on a whim. Out of the 20 horses eligible to "Run for the Roses" in the 2009 Kentucky Derby, the itinerant Mine That Bird squeaks in at number 19. The underdog's odds are 50–1. Third-worst in the race.

Arriving at a rainy, muddy Churchill Downs after a 1,000-mile trip from New Mexico behind Woolley's pickup, Mine That Bird behaves like it. Out of the gate, a tired-looking start quickly puts him at the back of the pack by eight lengths. The long-shot horse ridden by jockey Calvin Borel is lagging so far behind that NBC announcer Tom Durkin misses seeing him at first. After managing to catch up to a more respectable-looking last place in the home stretch, Borel strategically squeezes his horse next to the track's inner metal rail to save some precious ground.

What happens next defies all 135 years of Kentucky Derby precedent.

Catching fire on the inside, Mine That Bird stages the race's most explosive quarter-mile comeback ever. Blurring past 19 horses so fast that TV announcers once again miss spotting him until the dark horse is suddenly, inexplicably in front. The long-shot gelding wins the race by an incredible six lengths.

After staging the biggest Derby upset in over a century, Mine That Bird will pull off late-charging second- and third-place finishes in the Preakness and Belmont Stakes—once again, lolling in deep last before finding his crazy legs in the home stretch.

Long before racing ovals get taken over by engines and Pennzoil sponsorships, stadium tracks are ruled by bicycles. Dangerous ones, hurtling around packed velodromes at speeds of up to 40 mph—and pedaled by bona fide superstars.

In 1899, when indoor cycle racing holds the cachet of NASCAR, Indy and F1 combined, there's no question who the major attraction is at the fifth annual ICA Track Cycling World Championships. That would be 20-year-old Marshall "Major" Taylor. In a few years, the Massachusetts-based cycling phenomenon (aka "the Worcester Whirlwind") has taken the sport by storm, cleaning up in races across the U.S. At least the ones that are letting him compete.

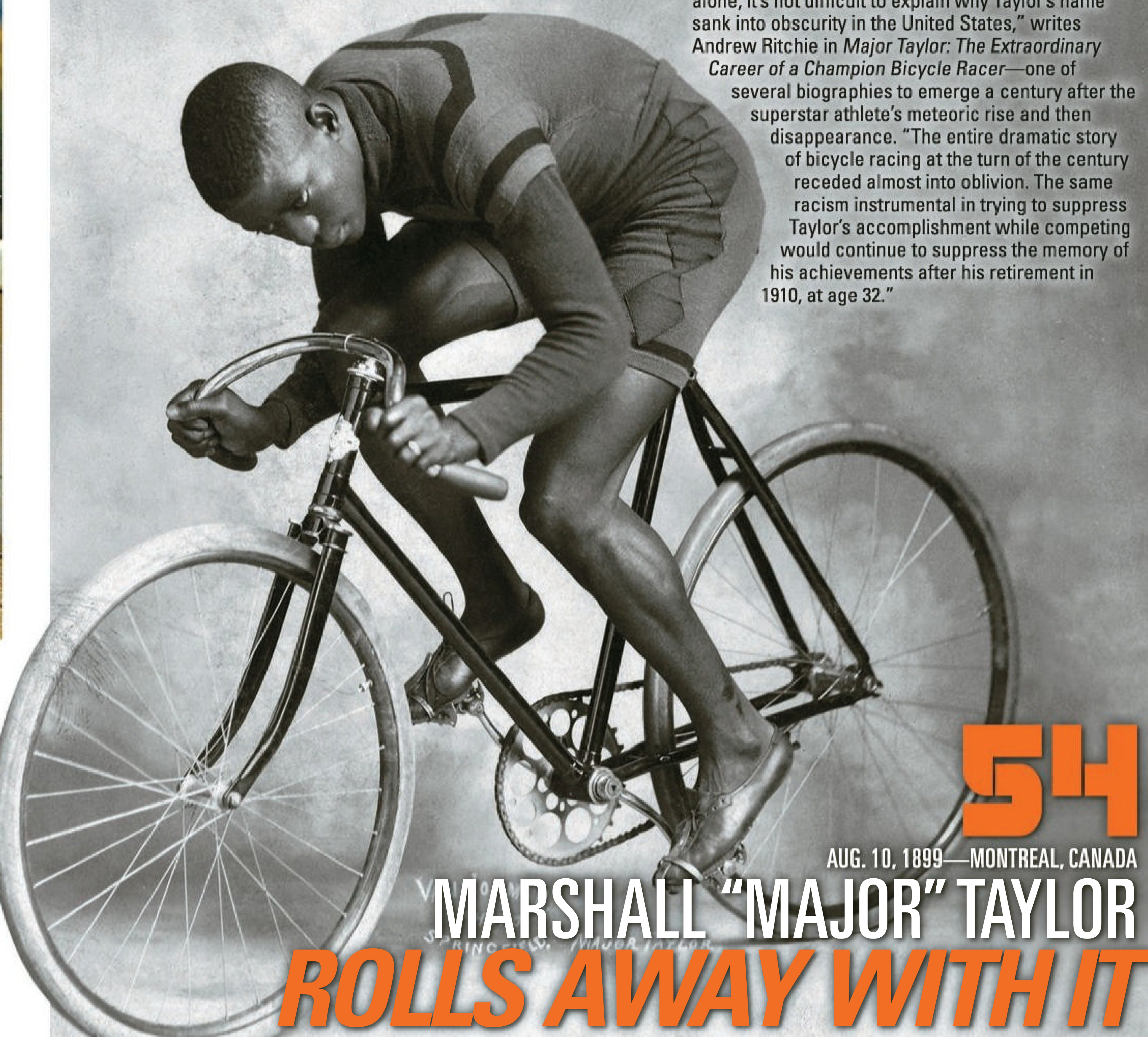
"He really is the first African-American sports hero," Michael Kranish, author of *The World's Fastest Man*, tells NPR. "Later on, it's Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens. It's a half-century before Jackie Robinson."

The most famous Black athlete of his day, Taylor has defeated Jim Crow–era odds and swiftly risen to the top of U.S. professional cycle racing ranks—all while being swindled out of victories by racist judges, barred from events across the American South, threatened by fans and even viciously attacked by fellow competitors. Despite all of that, Taylor remains the sport's biggest draw, becoming the "fastest man" (i.e., cyclist) in America, and—as of Aug. 10, 1899—the world.

Lining up at Montreal's Vélodrome de Queen's Park with a pack of elite international cyclists for the Men's Professional 1 Mile Sprint, Taylor proves to be the fan favorite here—eliciting huge cheers when he rockets into the lead, with Boston rival Tom Butler and French cyclist Courbe d'Outrelon right on his heels. Crossing the finish line first by just a few feet, Taylor wins the world cycling championship. For an encore, at an upcoming race, he'll break the 1-mile world record.

Retiring a decade later after extending his global following with successful cycle racing tours through Europe and Australia while setting new national speed records back in the U.S., the cyclist's legacy will soon vanish entirely from the public eye.

"While his turn-of-the-century achievements stood alone, it's not difficult to explain why Taylor's name sank into obscurity in the United States," writes Andrew Ritchie in *Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer*—one of several biographies to emerge a century after the superstar athlete's meteoric rise and then disappearance. "The entire dramatic story of bicycle racing at the turn of the century receded almost into oblivion. The same racism instrumental in trying to suppress Taylor's accomplishment while competing would continue to suppress the memory of his achievements after his retirement in 1910, at age 32."



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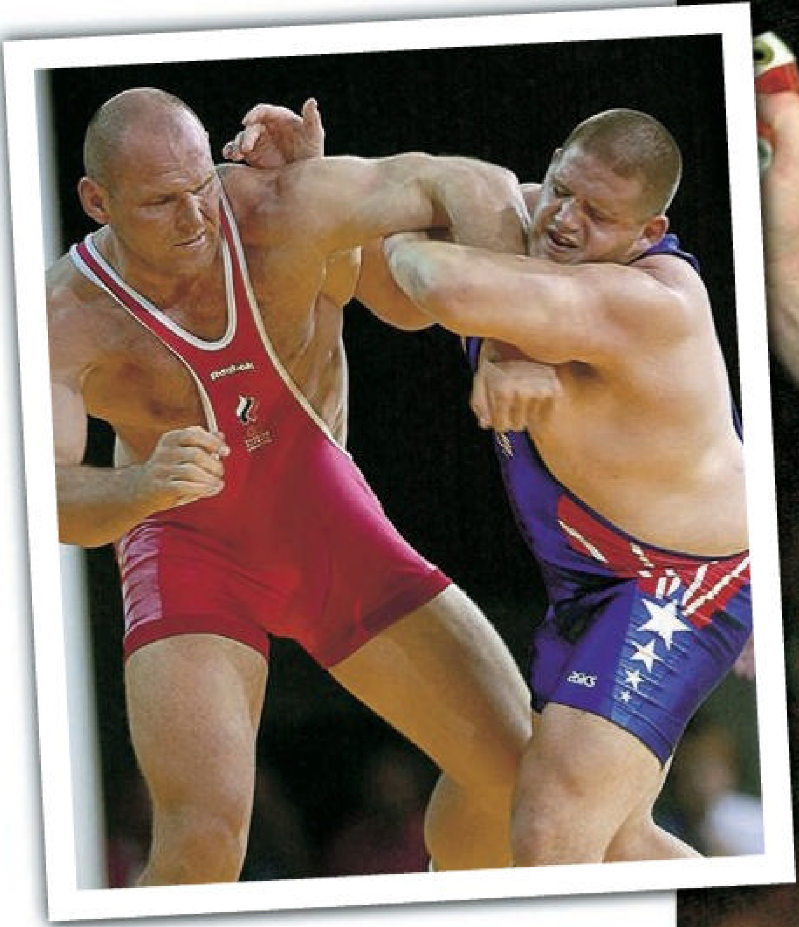
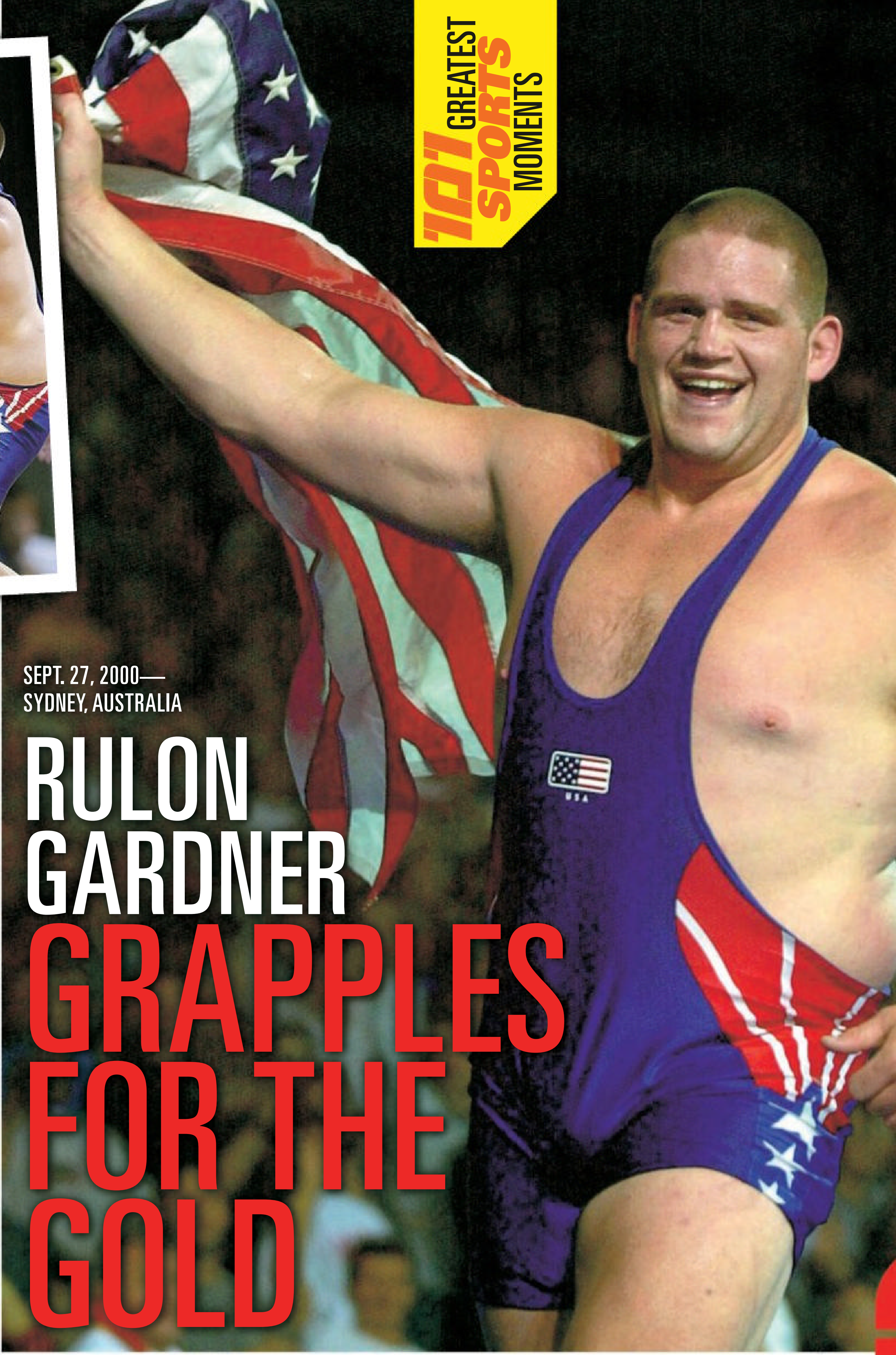
AUG. 10, 1899—MONTREAL, CANADA

MARSHALL "MAJOR" TAYLOR ROLLS AWAY WITH IT





SEPT. 27, 2000—
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

RULON GARDNER GRAPPLES FOR THE GOLD

Rulon Gardner is more than just a 287-pound underdog in the Greco-Roman wrestling gold medal round at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Having never medaled in international competition, the 29-year-old wrestler is virtually unknown outside of his hometown of Afton (pop. 1,818), where he has grown into a strong, disciplined contender the honest way—on a Wyoming dairy farm with eight siblings.

His opponent for the gold, meanwhile, is pretty much the mightiest Greco-Roman wrestler since Milo of Croton.

Aleksandr Karelin—aka "Alexander the Great"—is Russia's record three-time reigning gold medalist in the sport. A behemoth of instant intimidation, Karelin is unbeaten in 13 years, hasn't given up a single point in the last six years, and is all but guaranteed his fourth straight gold medal according to anyone who knows anything about Olympic Greco-Roman wrestling.

"If Gardner the American were to win this match, it would be akin to the 1980 U.S. hockey team's Miracle on Ice win over the Soviets," says NBC Sports announcer and Olympic wrestling legend Jeff Blatnick, when the two enormous athletes lock arms to begin the match. "It would be *that* unexpected. This would be called 'The Miracle on the Mat.'"

Gardner has made it here by wearing out Israel's mighty Yuri Yevseichik during a semifinal overtime victory. But Karelin—who the American underdog faced once before, three years earlier in the '97 World Championships—is another deal entirely.

"Even though this guy is probably gonna destroy you, you never know what's gonna happen," Gardner will later say about their second meeting. "I was just gonna go out there with a stiff neck and give it my all."

The match's slow-build remains tight, exhausting and scoreless until Gardner capitalizes on a rare Karelin slip—a broken grip that costs the defending champion a single point in the second round.

The match enters overtime—and for the first time maybe ever, Karelin starts looking increasingly desperate and tired as the final minutes, then seconds, wind down. Trying every do-or-die maneuver, the Goliath is stumped by a challenger who won't give him an inch. A few seconds before the match is officially over, Karelin drops his hands, steps back and solemnly concedes early.

In an astounding 1–0 win, Gardner seals one of the greatest upsets in Olympic history—performing a celebratory cartwheel to mark the occasion. Karelin will retire after the match and eventually enter Russian politics.

52

LISA LESLIE MAKES THE LEAP

JULY 30, 2002—LOS ANGELES, CA

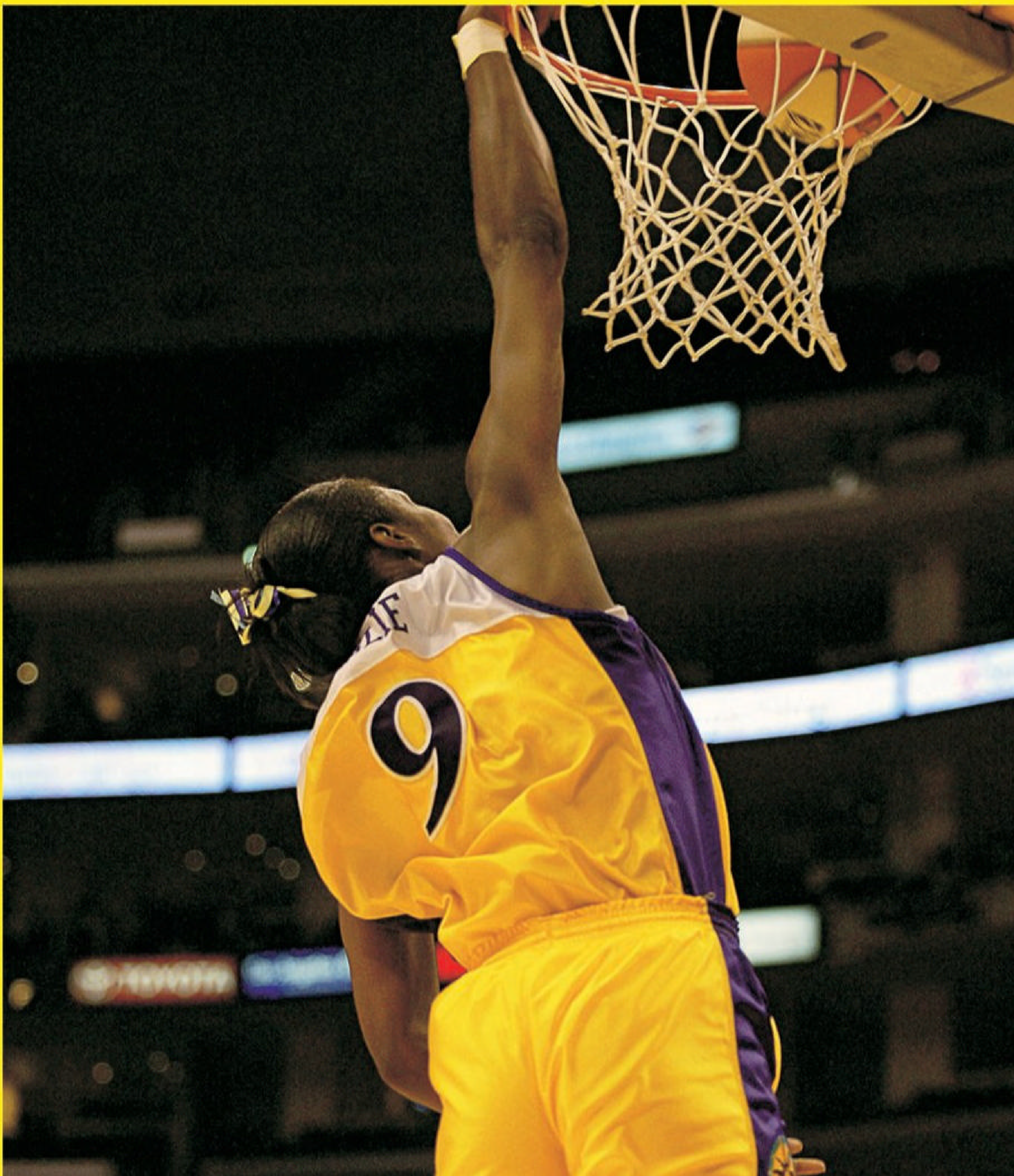
A bit of healthy anger leads to the most spontaneously awesome moment in the six-year-old Women's National Basketball Association. Down 11 points to the Miami Sol in a late season game after barely five minutes of play in the first quarter, L.A. Sparks star center Lisa Leslie isn't having it.

"I was just really pissed that we were losing," Leslie will later recall in an interview on *The Rich Eisen Show*. "I was thinking of what I could to inspire my teammates."

A missed shot in the Sparks zone leads to a long pass and breakaway for the 6'5" WNBA point leader. Charging down the court for the expected easy layup, Leslie figures out on the fly what she needs to do.

She leaps up and stuffs the ball—becoming the first woman in WNBA history to dunk. Igniting the crowd and lighting the Sparks.

"I did it without much thought, and I think the magnitude of it really came after," she says. "Back then, we'd have all these naysayers going on about the women's league—how they play good, but they can't dunk. And now look. We have women dunking all over the place."



Kelly Slater

IGNOR
ALM

51

ES BEING
OST 50

FEB. 5, 2022
—HALEIWA, HI

Before competing in Hawaii's Billabong Pro Pipeline 2022, Kelly Slater has been pushing the outer limits of elite athletic endurance for years—while also propelling himself to the very top of the greatest-athlete-ever debate.

The all-time king of pro surfing enters this year's World Championship Tour with 11 world titles dating back to 1992, when he became the youngest world champion of all time. In 2011, he would then become the oldest one too, at age 39. Now, just days shy of his 50th birthday, with seven Pipeline victories behind him over the last 30 years, Slater paddles into the monstrous North Shore break again—competing on one of the world's most notorious waves against competitors half his age.

"Kelly is in his own universe—he's making history right now," says World Surf League commentator Ross Williams. "What a moment for sport, let alone surfing."

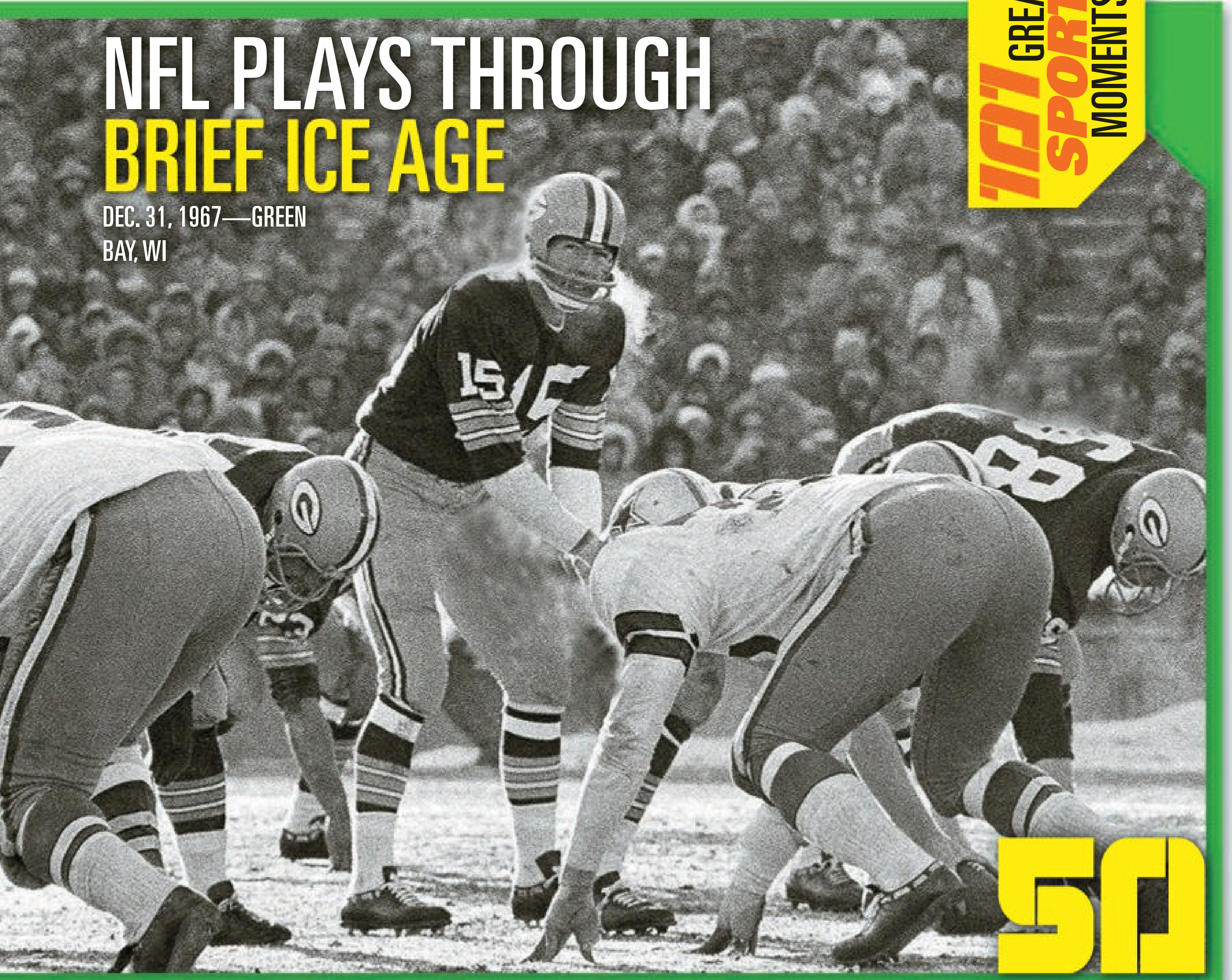
The moments keep happening for Slater during yet another incredible Pipeline performance, but the sickest one is at the tail end of the semifinals. Facing elimination with four seconds left, Slater snags one last monstrous barrel at the buzzer—dropping steep and deep before locking in a 9.23 score on a zero clock to advance to the final round.

Competing against 24-year-old Seth Moniz for his eighth Pipeline title, Slater will own the break—catching a final, airborne ride on a vicious Backdoor barrel before reemerging on the other side intact with hands in the air and a deal-sealing 9.77 score.

"I turn 50 in six days. I committed my life to this—to all of this. To all of the heartbreak and winning and all this crap, you know," says a teary-eyed Slater on the podium, logging his 56th event win. "I've hated lots of it. But I savor this—the best win of my life."

NFL PLAYS THROUGH BRIEF ICE AGE

DEC. 31, 1967—GREEN BAY, WI



50

The coldest NFL game ever played—1967's championship between the Green Bay Packers and Dallas Cowboys—is already slated to be a chilly grudge match before brutal weather conditions turn it into the most epic gridiron endurance test for both players and fans.

The two teams had met the previous season at Dallas's Cotton Bowl on Jan. 1 in a tight 34–27 title showdown claimed by the Packers. In the soon-to-be coined "Ice Bowl" hosted in Green Bay 364 days later, anticipation is high between the cross-country rivals.

And the mercury is shockingly low, even by Wisconsin standards. Dec. 31, 1967, will turn out to be the coldest New Year's Eve ever recorded in Green Bay.

"It's just too cold to play," Willie Wood tells a service station attendant trying to boost the Packer safety's frozen car battery that Sunday morning before the game, as recounted in the Vince Lombardi biography *When Pride Still Mattered*. "They're gonna call this game off."

But the game is happening. Several other Green Bay players scramble to get to an ice-slicked Lambeau Field when their dead cars don't budge either.

By 1 p.m. kickoff time, it's minus 13 degrees Fahrenheit with a wind chill nearing minus 50, and dropping fast with the sun. Already there are casualties. Seven members of the local college Marching Chiefs band have been hospitalized for hypothermia following the pre-game show. When referee Norm Schacter blows his metal whistle to start the game it freezes to his lips. In a crowd of over 50,000 shivering, obstinate fans, an elderly man will die from cold exposure. During the game, a CBS announcer will earnestly remark, "I'm going to take a bite of my coffee now."

A spectacular game somehow forges on—featuring resilient players sliding all over an ice-caked field. Playing through his own frostbitten fingers, Packer QB Bart Starr will throw for two early touchdown passes before the Cowboys rally late in the game to take a three-point lead. A storybook last offensive drive by Starr will end with the future Hall of Famer flinging himself into the end zone on a gutsy sneak with 13 seconds left on the clock—handing the Packers a 21–17 victory while sealing one of the most exciting finishes in a championship NFL game—that will still be nicknamed for the weather.

"We gambled and we won," Packers coach Vince Lombardi barks after the Ice Bowl. Cowboys coach Tom Landry will stoically add that football games should never be played in such conditions. A few years later, the league agrees—barring cold-weather cities from future championship game sites.

Ronaldo

REINVENTS THE BICYCLE KICK

APRIL 3, 2018—TURIN, ITALY

49

Soccer's quintessential "Look at me!" stunt—the bicycle kick—has been tapped by FIFA as the game's "most spectacular sight." Invented in 1930s Brazil or 1910s Chile or 1890s Peru—depending on which soccer-obsessed South American country you happen to consult—the bigger debate at this point is which acrobatic soccer legend has since performed the most insane overhead goal in the last 90-plus years.

Was it Klaus Fischer's spectacular bicycle kick-tying goal in the extra minutes of 1982's West Germany vs. France semifinal? Or Manuel Negrete's sick kick for Mexico against Bulgaria in the 1986 World Cup? Was it Marco van Basten's unforgettable inverted hoof for AC Milan against Gothenburg? Or Wayne Rooney's ridiculous, 78th-minute winner in the Manchester derby?

Zlatan Ibrahimovic's nearly 33-yard overhead blast for Sweden past helpless English goalkeeper Joe Hart has to be the most obvious nominee of all, right?

Ours for its unmatched, close-range elegance is Cristiano Ronaldo's overhead strike during a Champions League quarter final match for Real Madrid over Juventus. With his back to the goal, launching himself high and horizontal, *El Bicho*'s backward boot past frozen Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon ought to settle any debate about the Portuguese superstar's GOAT status.

The goal will have opposing fans involuntarily rising to their feet to applaud their team's nemesis—while Madrid team manager (the legendary Zinedine Zidane, no stranger to the odd bicycle kick himself) shakes his head in wonder.

"When the ball comes across to him you think—'No, you're not going to try an overhead kick'—and then, bang!" marvels BBC Radio 5 Live announcer Pat Nevin. "It's unnatural, the timing of it alone. The imagination to do it is extraordinary."

Ibrahimovic's reaction is more measured: "Nice goal. He should try it from 40 meters."

48

Kirk Gibson HOBBLES HOME

OCT. 15, 1988—LOS ANGELES, CA

Game 1 of the World Series. Bottom of the ninth, two-out. The against the heavily favored Oakland A's with a runner on first. And what's this? Here comes a surprise pinch hitter not on the day's roster—limping from the dugout and up to the plate like a wounded last resort.

"Look who's coming up," Vin Scully announces on the NBC broadcast. The legendary broadcaster has seen it all at this point in Dodgers history, but nothing quite like this. "You talk about a roll of the dice. This is it."

Suffering serious injuries to both legs after soldiering through a grueling seven-game pennant series against the New York Mets, Dodgers veteran slugger Kirk Gibson has been held out of the World Series lineup. But it's Kirk Gibson. Before the game, he relays to Dodger manager Tommy Lasorda that he can pinch-hit in, well, a serious pinch. Here it is.

Lasorda's glum expression from the dugout inspires zero hope while Oakland A's ace closer Dennis Eckersley hurls one searing fast ball after another at his injured final out. Gibson grimaces with every swing, pushing his shot hamstring and worse knee to a full count after several excruciating fouls.

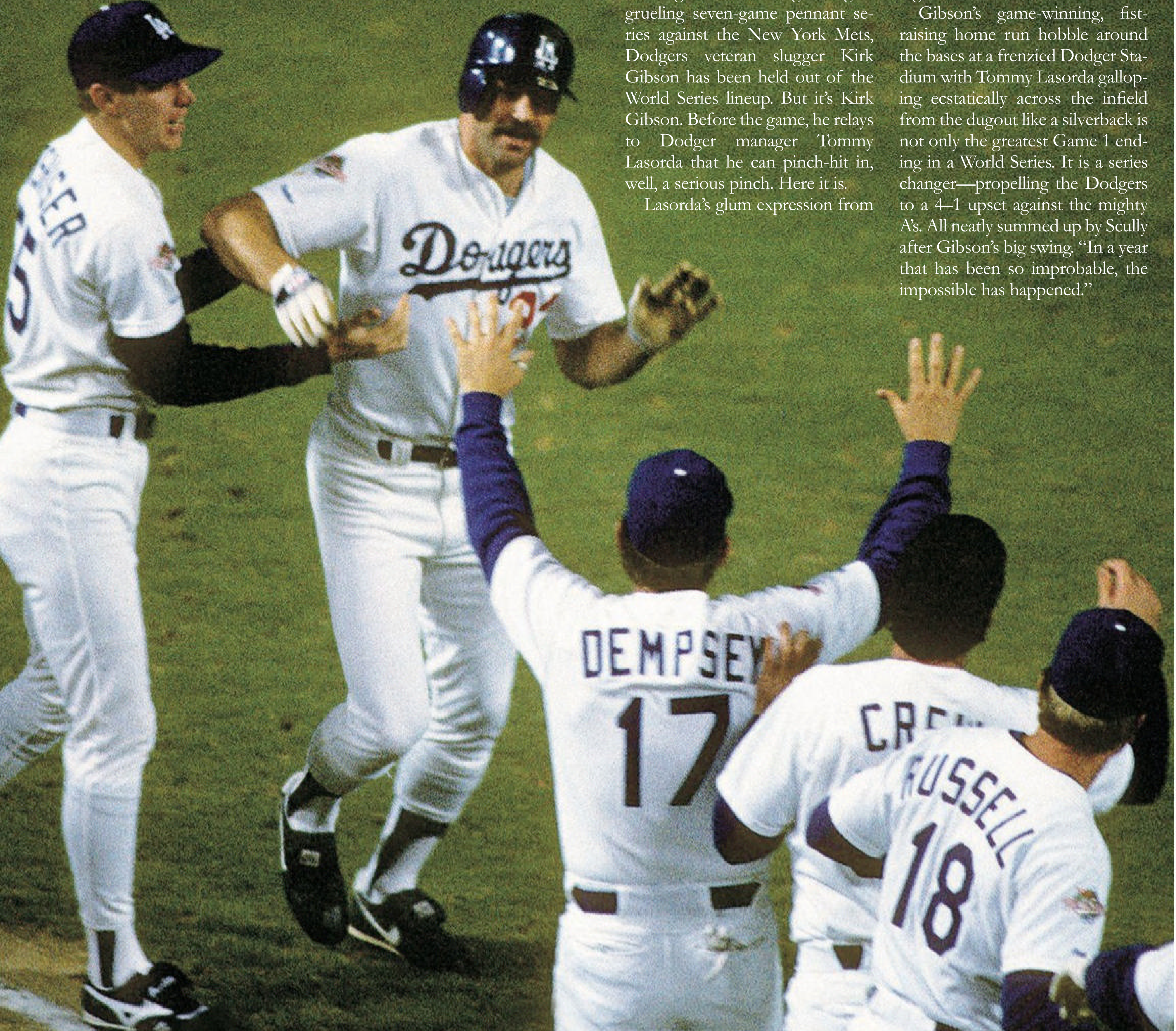
"It's one thing to favor one leg, but you can't favor two," Scully muses from above.

Meanwhile, the roaring L.A. crowd is on its feet in solidarity, letting Gibson know that they know the deal—and that they believe. What's the alternative? Gibson steps out of the batter's box to regain his bearings. He sets up again to face the 3–2 pitch. Here it comes—the very backdoor slider Gibson was expecting.

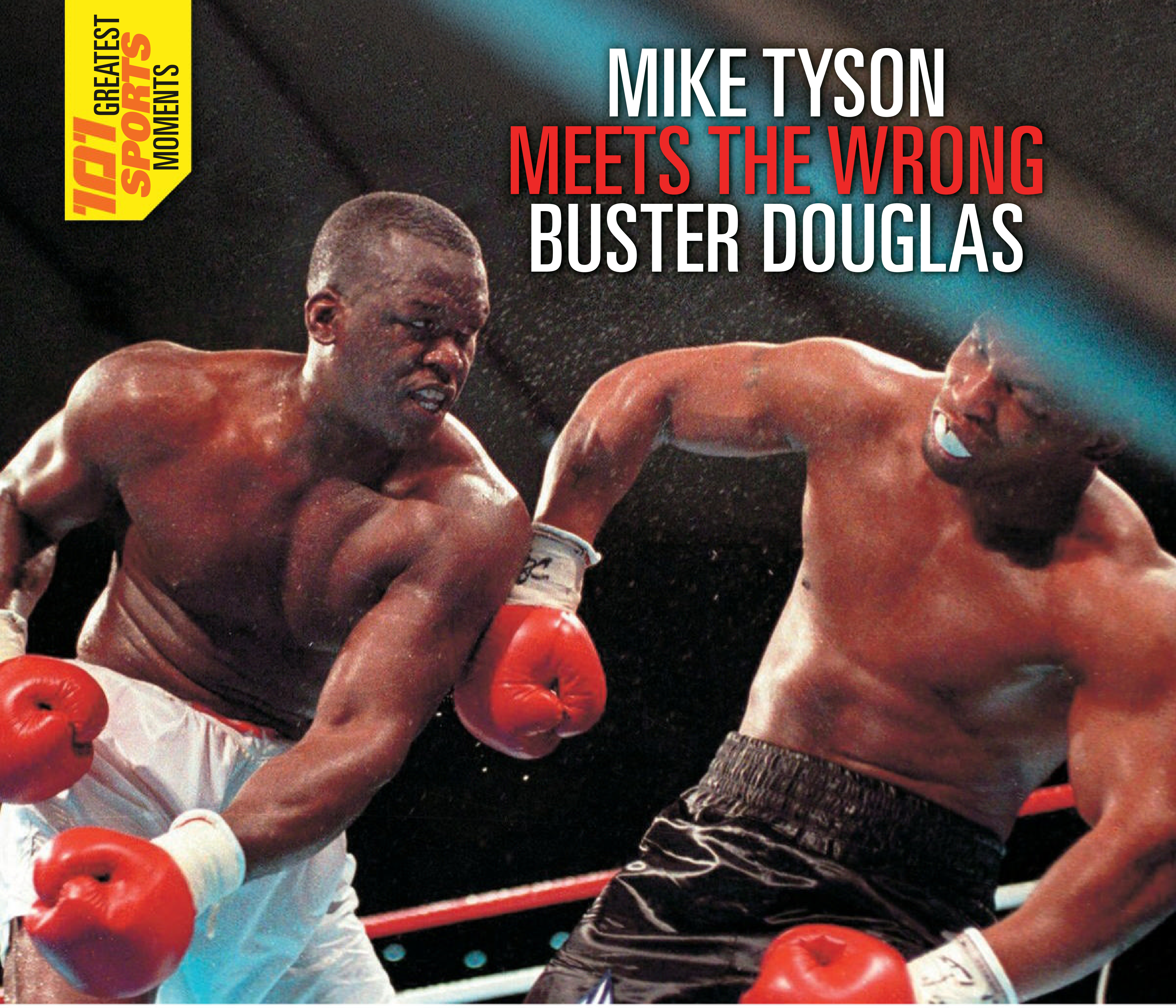
Whack!

"High fly ball into right field," announces Scully, above a screaming crowd. "She is … GONE!"

Gibson's game-winning, fist-raising home run hobble around the bases at a frenzied Dodger Stadium with Tommy Lasorda galloping ecstatically across the infield from the dugout like a silverback is not only the greatest Game 1 ending in a World Series. It is a series changer—propelling the Dodgers to a 4–1 upset against the mighty A's. All neatly summed up by Scully after Gibson's big swing. "In a year that has been so improbable, the impossible has happened."



MIKE TYSON MEETS THE WRONG BUSTER DOUGLAS



47

FEB. 11, 1990— TOKYO, JAPAN

All generous 42–1 odds aside, everyone knows that James "Buster" Douglas has zero chance in the ring against the horror show that is Mike Tyson. Vegas sportsbooks don't even issue odds for this one. No boxer has survived six rounds against Iron Mike, the undefeated and undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. Tyson's 37–0 record includes 33 knockouts and, in his most recent fight, dispensing with Carl "The Truth" Williams in 93 seconds.

Douglas, whose last shot at the title three years ago got him TKO'd, is viewed as nothing more than a warm-up for the invincible champ's next real match against top undefeated contender Evander Holyfield. The underdog challenger is also dealing with other setbacks outside of the ring. Three weeks ago, Douglas' mother passed away. The mother of his son is battling a severe kidney ailment. He's just come down with the flu. If there's ever such thing as good timing to be fighting Mike Tyson, now isn't it.

"This fight is over before it begins or soon thereafter," says HBO boxing analyst Larry Merchant before the expected rout at a packed Tokyo Dome.

Then the match begins. Douglas wins Round 1, landing several unanswered rights. Douglas takes Round 2, pounding an attacking Tyson back with repeated head shots. Douglas holds up in Round 3, before winning Round 4 and Round 5. By Round 6—the round that no opponent has ever gotten past with Mike Tyson—Douglas delivers a stunning uppercut and Tyson's eye begins to swell. On it goes. Douglas dominates virtually every round, surviving a brutal Tyson uppercut in Round 8, which puts him on his back. He gets up, fights on, punches Tyson's eye shut and wins more rounds.

It's a brutal four-punch combination from Douglas in Round 10 that puts Tyson on the ground for the first time ever in his career. This ends the fight—and marks the biggest boxing upset that all other shockers are measured against.

Douglas' reign as heavyweight champ will be predictably brief, lasting just a single bout before being beaten by Holyfield eight months later. Tyson will eventually reclaim a partial heavyweight title—six years and one prison term later.

CHRIS AND MARTINA MAKE MATCH #65 MIGHTY MEMORABLE

JUNE 8, 1985—PARIS, FRANCE

46

Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova are buds. Just not on the court, where the dueling women's singles #1s have been co-dominating women's tennis for years while playing out the most enduring rivalry of the decade.

Opposites in just about every way—Evert is a right-handed baseliner, America's sweetheart, cool and collected; left-handed Navratilova (a U.S. citizen after defecting from communist Czechoslovakia) plays a more emotional, serve-and-volley attack game—they're not quite done settling their differences when meeting yet again at the 1985 French Open championship.

Of their 80 matches (60 of them finals) between 1973 and 1988, No. 65 here at Paris' Court Philippe Chatrier will turn out to be the hands-down thrillfest.

Entering the match, Navratilova has a 33–31 edge on Evert, winning 15 of their last 16 meetings. ("It's about time you beat me," Martina had quipped to her friend after Evert finally won one at a Virginia Slims Florida tournament earlier in the spring.) The two tennis legends walk out onto the clay court together in sync, casually chitchatting.

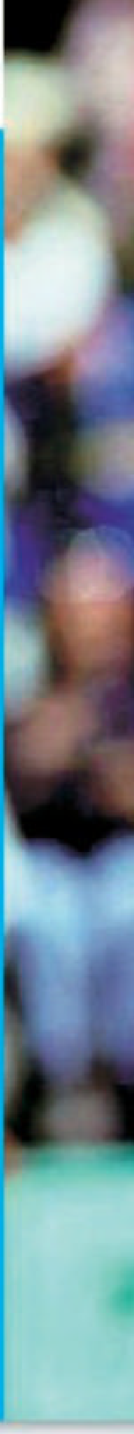
Then it's all business during a crazy seesaw of a match for the next three hours.

After taking the first set, Evert serves for the match in the second, only to be broken by Navratilova who'll rally back and win the tie-breaker. Serving for the match with a 5–3 lead, Evert is again broken before finding herself facing a triple break point at 5–5 in the final set. Fighting back, Evert wins her serve before squeaking out a 7–5 nail-biter victory during a blur of spectacular rallies.

Navratilova trots up to the net and hugs her rival. No wry remarks this time.

"It's too bad someone had to win," Navratilova tells *Sports Illustrated*. "It was one of those matches that should go on forever." Evert will later call this one the most satisfying of her 18 Grand Slam victories.

In later chapters of their careers, the friendly rivalry will continue with Evert an analyst at ESPN and Navratilova broadcasting for the Tennis Channel.



KENT
SAHARA

45

SACHIN TENDULKAR DOES A DOUBLE HUNDRED

FEB. 24, 2010—GWALIOR, INDIA

In theory, it was achievable—a single batsman racking up 200 runs in an afternoon cricket match. But back in 1971, when the game's One Day International (ODI) format was launched, the double hundred seemed about as likely to happen as, say, scoring 101 points in a basketball game or pitching a pair of no-hitters in a doubleheader.

It takes nearly 40 years before the greatest cricketer of the modern era smacks the one day double-hundred into existence and possibility.

"If there's ever one deserving to break this milestone—this Everest," notes cricket commentator Danny Morrison during an ODI match between host India and South Africa, where thousands gather at Captain Roop Singh Stadium to witness cricket history, "it is certainly Sachin Tendulkar."

Removing his helmet and raising his arms in the air to acknowledge his billion or so fans, Tendulkar (aka "The Little Master") is already modern cricket's Gretzky-Jordan-Jeter-and-Brady rolled into a prolific 5'5" package before he seals modern cricket's milestone with a final single that gives him his 200 runs in just 147 balls.

Since Tendulkar's biggest day at bat—achieved at age 36, three years before he retires—the one-day double century has been broken by several other elite cricketers. But it takes the greatest run scorer of all time to bat the way.

44 USA WOMEN WIN 4TH WO AND 1ST EQUAL

Before a capacity, "U-S-A"-chanting crowd at Stade de Lyon, the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team clinches their fourth World Cup title with a dramatic 2–0 finish over the Netherlands. We'll have more on that in a moment.

But listen to the shifting refrain in the stands after the final whistle. An even louder "EQUAL PAY!" chant is now thundering through the stadium. It's a unified reminder that, despite the victory on the world stage, the USWNT is fighting an off-the-field battle back home to earn pay that matches their male counterparts who have yet to come anywhere near winning a single World Cup, let alone four of them.

Favored from the outset, the U.S. sails through some of the earlier-round games with wins over Thailand (13–0) and Chile (3–0). In the final matchup against the Dutch, the first half of the game remains tight and scoreless.

Then, at minute 61, U.S. team captain Megan Rapinoe sinks a penalty kick—her sixth goal of the tournament. The outspoken, pink-haired captain—soon to earn the tournament's Golden Boot award—strikes a triumphant pose with her outstretched arms. Eight minutes later, midfielder Rose Lavelle adds a second goal, zipping the ball low and right into the net from nearly 20 feet out.

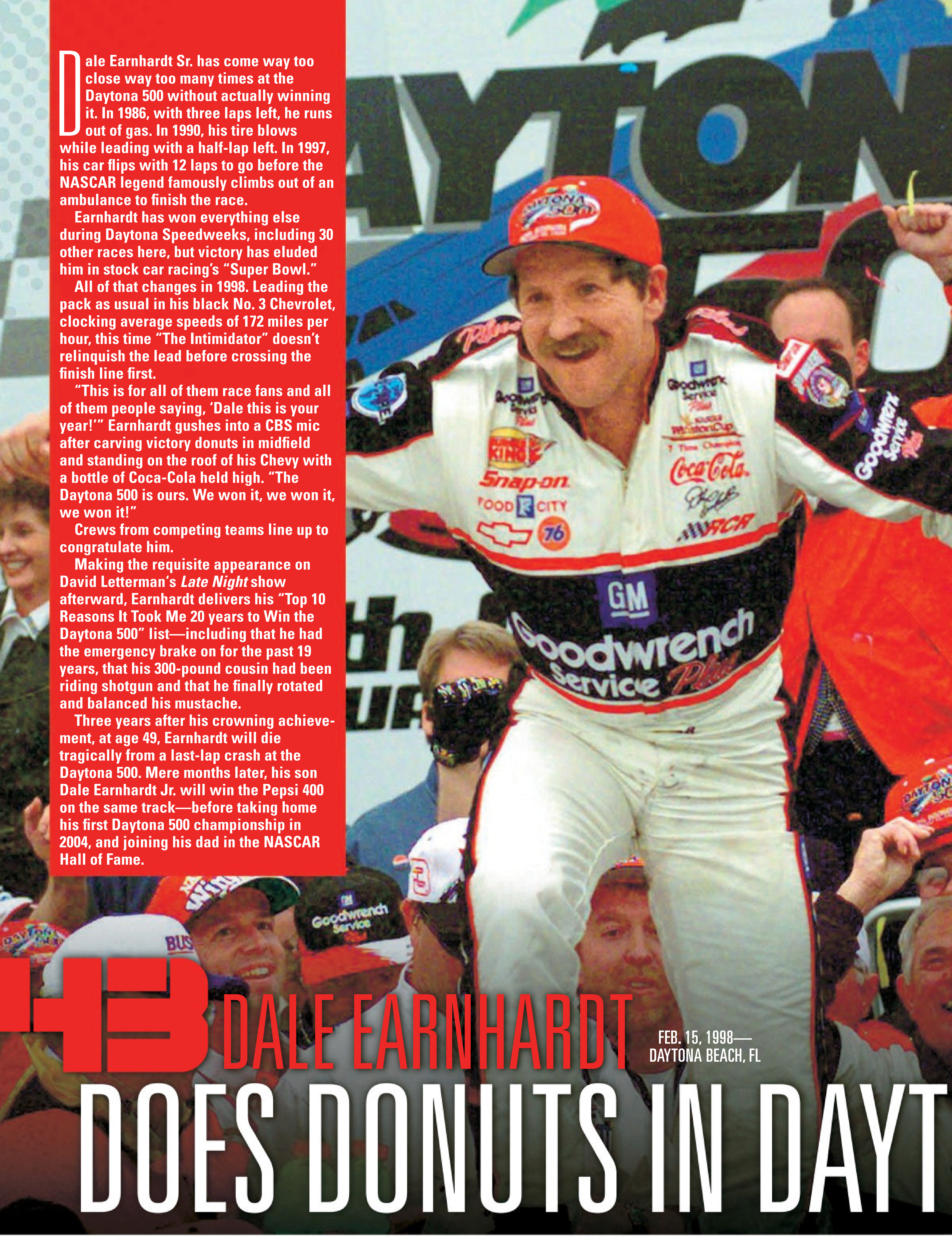
With the win, the USWNT reinforces its reputation as one of the most dominant teams in sports, claiming four FIFA Women's World Cup titles, plus eight Americas Championships and four Olympic golds.

The next big win comes three years later, when players from the USWNT reach a $24 million settlement with the U.S. Soccer Federation in their class action lawsuit for equal pay. Moving forward, a commitment is made to provide the same rate as men's national teams "in all friendlies and tournaments, including the World Cup."

RLD CUP— PAY SETTLEMENT

JULY 7, 2019—DÉCINES-CHARPIEU, FRANCE

WORLD CHAMPIONS 2019



43

DALE EARNHARDT DOES DONUTS IN DAYT

FEB. 15, 1998—
DAYTONA BEACH, FL

Dale Earnhardt Sr. has come way too close way too many times at the Daytona 500 without actually winning it. In 1986, with three laps left, he runs out of gas. In 1990, his tire blows while leading with a half-lap left. In 1997, his car flips with 12 laps to go before the NASCAR legend famously climbs out of an ambulance to finish the race.

Earnhardt has won everything else during Daytona Speedweeks, including 30 other races here, but victory has eluded him in stock car racing's "Super Bowl."

All of that changes in 1998. Leading the pack as usual in his black No. 3 Chevrolet, clocking average speeds of 172 miles per hour, this time "The Intimidator" doesn't relinquish the lead before crossing the finish line first.

"This is for all of them race fans and all of them people saying, 'Dale this is your year!'" Earnhardt gushes into a CBS mic after carving victory donuts in midfield and standing on the roof of his Chevy with a bottle of Coca-Cola held high. "The Daytona 500 is ours. We won it, we won it, we won it!"

Crews from competing teams line up to congratulate him.

Making the requisite appearance on David Letterman's *Late Night* show afterward, Earnhardt delivers his "Top 10 Reasons It Took Me 20 years to Win the Daytona 500" list—including that he had the emergency brake on for the past 19 years, that his 300-pound cousin had been riding shotgun and that he finally rotated and balanced his mustache.

Three years after his crowning achievement, at age 49, Earnhardt will die tragically from a last-lap crash at the Daytona 500. Mere months later, his son Dale Earnhardt Jr. will win the Pepsi 400 on the same track—before taking home his first Daytona 500 championship in 2004, and joining his dad in the NASCAR Hall of Fame.

42

SPRINGBOKS TEAM UP WITH MANDELA

JUNE 24, 1995—
JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

In 1995, South Africa's biggest rugby game ever is both dwarfed and magnified by a sweeping political backdrop. A year after the country's first democratic election since the fall of apartheid, South Africa—as if on cue—is not only hosting and playing in its first Rugby Union World Cup after decades of international athletic bans for its segregationist policies, but its national rugby union team, the Springboks, have made it all the way to the finals.

The team's biggest new fan and advocate is none other than newly elected Nelson Mandela himself, the nation's first Black president.

"I ask you to stand by these boys because they are our kind," Mandela urges naturally unenthused Black audiences, about supporting a virtually all-white rugby team that's been both historically and symbolically aligned with the nation's oppressive minority rule. The persuasive president—a former 27-year political prisoner during Afrikaner rule—views these very Springboks as a conduit for unity, shared national pride, and the "rainbow nation at peace with itself" voiced in his 1994 inaugural speech.

At the start of his term, Mandela will invite Springboks captain Francois Pienaar to meet with him over tea to discuss such things. Pienaar's takeaway. The president would very much appreciate it if the Springboks win the World Cup—for the new South Africa.

Cut to June 24 at a packed Ellis Park Stadium in Johannesburg. A capacity crowd of 63,000 Springboks fans clearly shares Mandela's sentiments during the day of the finals. The President is there, donning green-and-gold Springbok colors for all to see.

Also here: the Springboks heavily favored opponents, the undefeated 1995 New Zealand All Blacks—the most fearsome team in rugby World Cup history. New Zealand has destroyed their opponents during the tournament by an aggregate, nonsensical score of 315–104. Their unstoppable 20-year-old winger, Jonah Lomu, leads the tournament with seven tries—including four in the semifinal against England, the last of which he literally tramples overtop of English fullback Mike Catt in an All Black statement like no other.

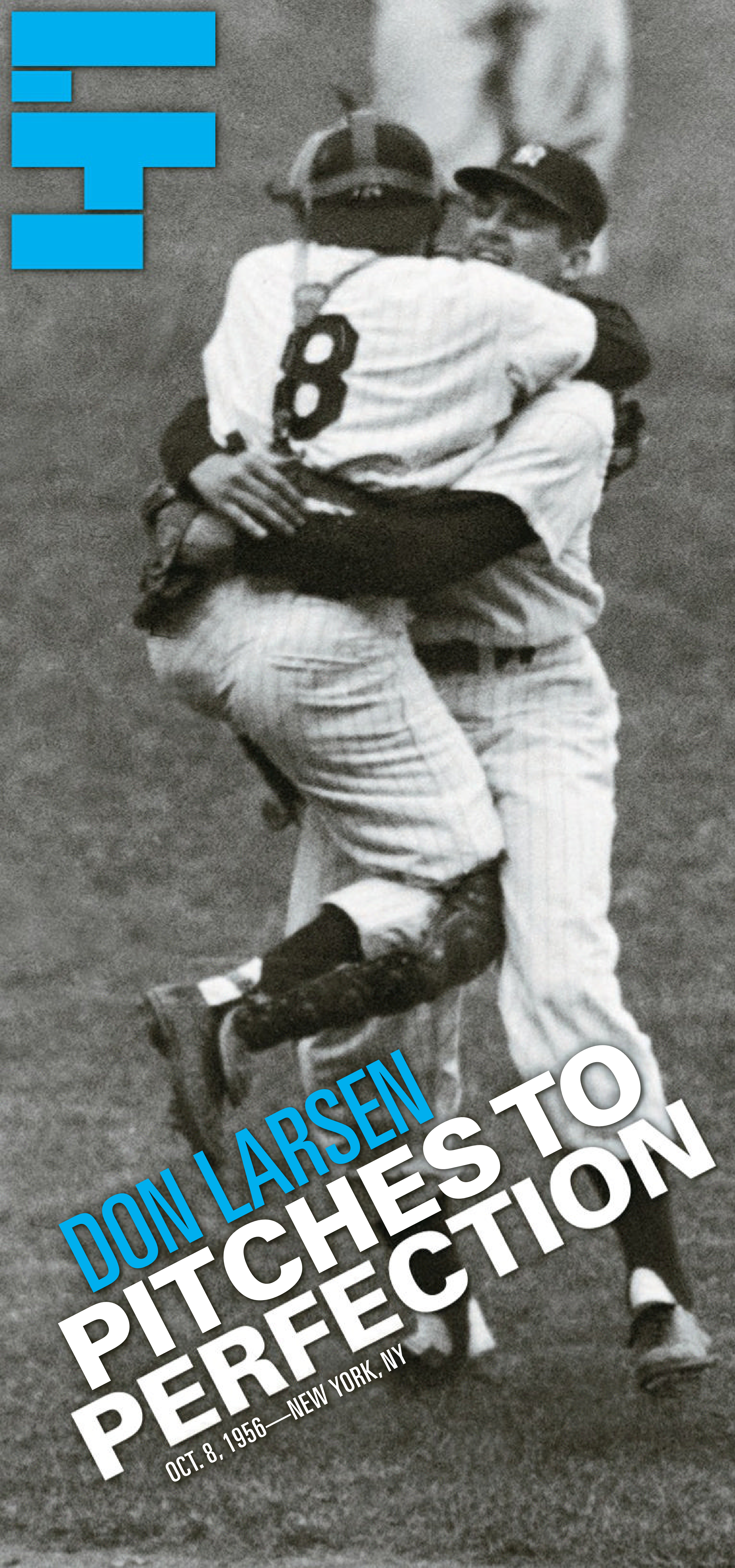
Holding Lomu and the All Blacks in check, an impassioned Springbok team will prevent New Zealand from scoring a single try. The game, a low-scoring kicking duel tied at full-time, becomes the first World Cup final to enter extra time—where a game-winning drop kick from South Africa fly-half Joel Stransky does it for the Springboks, for Mandela, for South Africa.

"When the final whistle blew, this country changed forever," says team captain Pienaar years later, famously being presented the country's first William Webb Ellis trophy by a beaming Nelson Mandela in a Springboks jersey—the climactic moment.

"The whole of South Africa erupted in celebration, Blacks as joyful as the whites," writes Martin Meredith in his biography, *Mandela*. "It was a moment of national fusion that Mandela had done much to inspire."

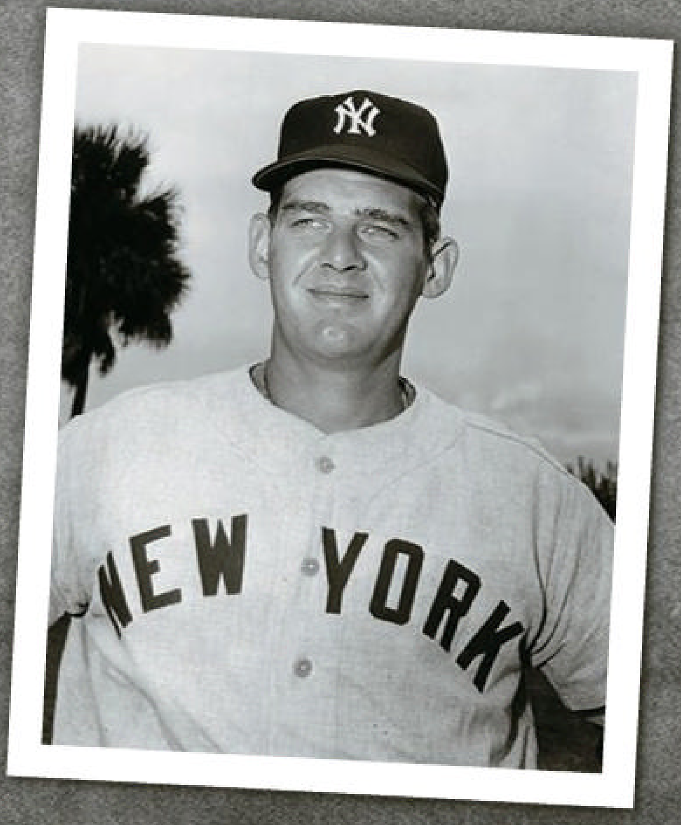
Of course, there's some overstatement here—in a post-apartheid South Africa that would continue to struggle. But the efforts of Mandela and the Springboks to leverage rugby as a means of bringing a divided nation closer together remains true, profound and prophetic as well.

Cut to 2021: South Africa captures its third Rugby World Cup championship, defeating heavily favored England with the most racially diverse Springboks team yet—including Siya Kolisi, the country's first Black team captain.



DON LARSEN PITCHES TO PERFECTION

OCT. 8, 1956—NEW YORK, NY



It takes just two rough innings on the mound before Yankees pitcher Don Larsen is yanked from Game 2 of the '56 World Series against the rival Brooklyn Dodgers.

Doubtful he'll have another opportunity to pitch in the series, the lanky right-hander shows up to the locker room before Game 5—and sees a baseball tucked in his shoe. Here it is, a second-chance blessing from Yankees manager Casey Stengel telling him he's back in the game.

"I must admit, I was shocked," Larsen writes in his autobiography.
"I knew I had to do better than the last time, keep the game close and somehow give our team a chance to win. Casey was betting on me, and I was determined not to let him down this time."

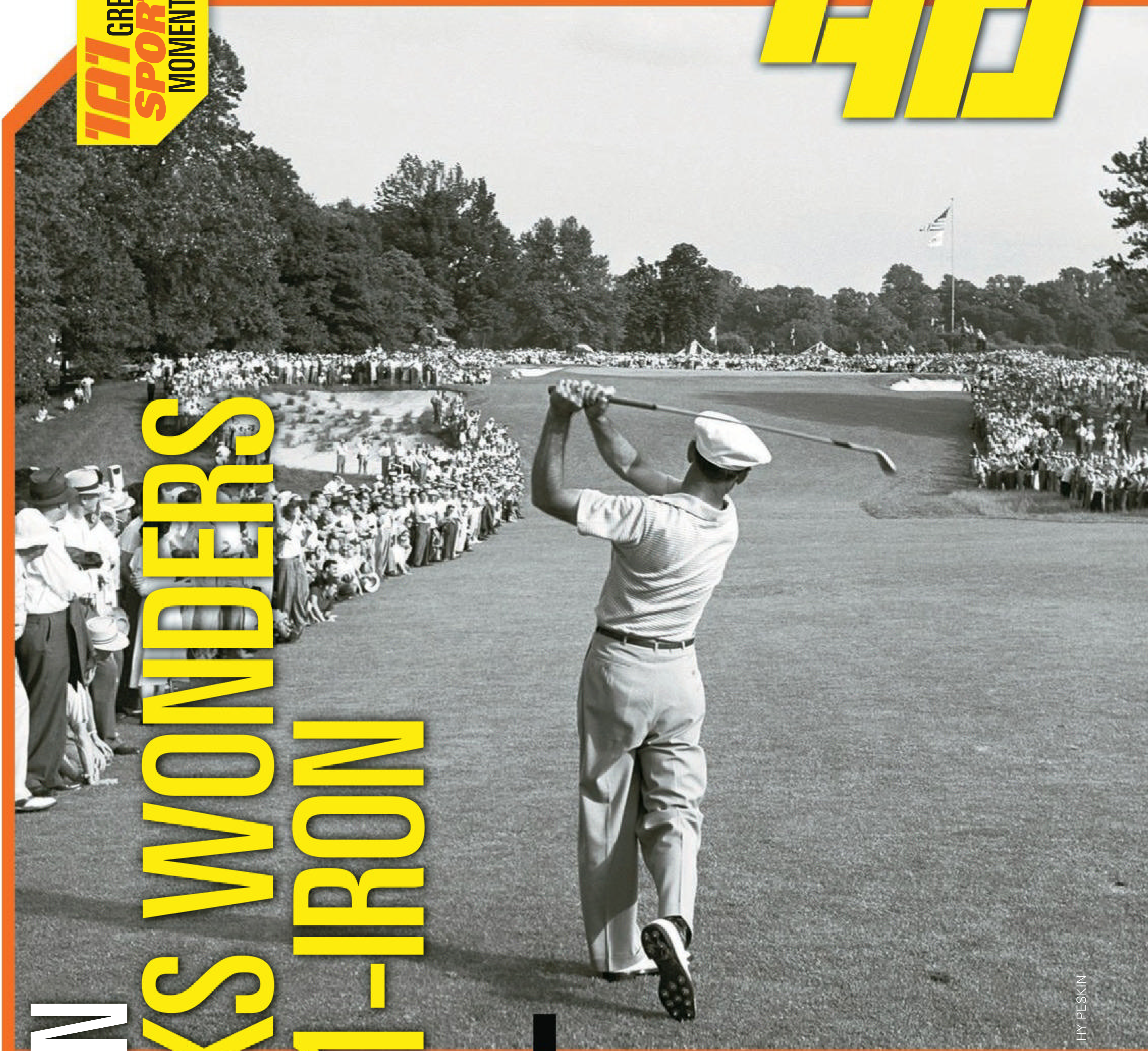
He doesn't. That day, Larsen pitches the only perfect game in World Series history.

Remarkably, Larsen accomplishes baseball's hardest feat in just 97 pitches, striking out seven along the way and only throwing three balls once to a single batter (Pee Wee Reese). Of only 23 perfect games thrown in MLB history, Larsen's is also one of only two no-hitters in post-season play.

"They can never break my record—the best they can do is tie it," Larsen will later quip to reporters. "October 8, 1956, was a mystical trip through fantasyland," he marvels. "Sometimes I still wonder whether it really all happened."

In a released statement after the beloved pitcher dies at age 90 on New Year's Day in 2020, the Yankees organization will call Larsen's perfect game "a defining moment" for the franchise. "The unmitigated joy reflected in his embrace with Yogi Berra after the game's final out will forever hold a secure place in Yankees lore. It was the pinnacle of baseball success and a reminder of the incredible, unforgettable things that can take place on a baseball field."

40



HY PESKIN

BEN HOGAN WORKS WONDERS WITH A 1-IRON

JUNE 10, 1950—ARDMORE, PA

Limping through a final round at Merion Golf Club, Ben Hogan wasn't expected to compete in the 50th U.S. Open—let alone notch the greatest swing of the Texas-born golf legend's storied career.

Still recovering from a near-fatal car accident and playing with bandaged-up legs, the 1948 champion soldiers into a three-way tie for the lead entering a tough 18th hole. Here he forces a playoff round by performing a Herculean, 213-yard, 1-iron approach to 40 feet (followed by a two-putt for par) that old-school golfers point to as the most iconic shot in the game's history—performed with a club that no modern day golfer would dream of wrestling with in this (or, really, any) situation.

Like Edmund Hillary scaling Everest in a Shetland jumper, Hogan's mid-century grit—immortalized by an iconic *Sports Illustrated* black-and-white photo capturing that 1-Iron shot—earns the eternal respect of today's superstars with their fancier clubs.

The following day, the 37-year-old golfer advances to a tight, 18-hole playoff against 1946 champion Lloyd Mangrum and George Fazio. Securing a four-stroke lead late in the round, Hogan will go on to win his second of four U.S. Open titles in what's dubbed the "Miracle at Merion."

LAIRD HAMILTON
MEETS THE MILLENNIU

AUG. 17, 2000—
TEAHUPOO, TAHITI

"Laird's wave at Teahupoo was the most amazing, single-most significant ride in surfing history," says surfing writer and adventurer Sam George in the seminal 2004 surfing documentary *Riding Giants*. "What it did is it completely restructured our entire perception of what was possible."

Surfing's most game-changing barrel has been hiding on a remote break off the southwest coast of Tahiti for the right guy to try it out. Known as Teahupoo (loose translation: "place of skulls") and long-considered unrideable, the break is an aberrant fold of ocean that's been politely described as a "freak of hydrodynamics." Unfathomable in volume and ferocity for what it lacks in height, its colossal tube dead-ends on a shallow coral reef with zero room for error during normal visiting hours.

On a sunny Thursday during Y2K, Teahupoo serves up a gross exaggeration of itself—dubbed "the Millennium Wave"—to tow-in surfing pioneer Laird Hamilton, who drops in against all reasonable judgment.

Disappearing into a monstrous barrel that instantly tightens around him, Hamilton somehow whizzes out the other side of this fatal fun house intact, reappearing out of a blinding underworld of foam. He'll be credited with riding "the heaviest" wave ever surfed—in all senses of the word. The mystical, edge-teetering experience will bring surfing's greatest limits-pusher himself to tears.

"It was a barrier-breaking moment," Hamilton will tell *Surfline* on the 10th anniversary of the "ride heard round the world" that has since opened Teahupoo up to a new generation of surfers. "It showed both me and others that waves like that can be ridden—and they have been by a lot of people since then. You have to believe in the unbelievable."

TIM McKENNA

LINDSEY VONN WINS
THE TOUGH-AS-STEEL MEDAL

FEB. 15, 2006—TURIN, ITALY

38

Alpine Skiing
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Lindsey Vonn, the greatest female ski racer of all time, finishes eighth in the 2006 Winter Games in Turin. This may not seem quite as impressive as the alpine ski racer's three Olympic medals and 82 World Cup victories until you fathom the circumstances—of racing just two days after a horrific practice-run crash that leaves her splayed out in the snow thinking her career is over.

Vonn first stepped on to the Olympic stage in 2002 at the Salt Lake City Games, making an impressive debut at age 17. Four years later, in Turin, Italy, expectations are huge. Then comes the training-run crash at 60 miles per hour, somersaulting Vonn through the air. She's airlifted off the mountain. Doctors on board initially suspect she has a broken back.

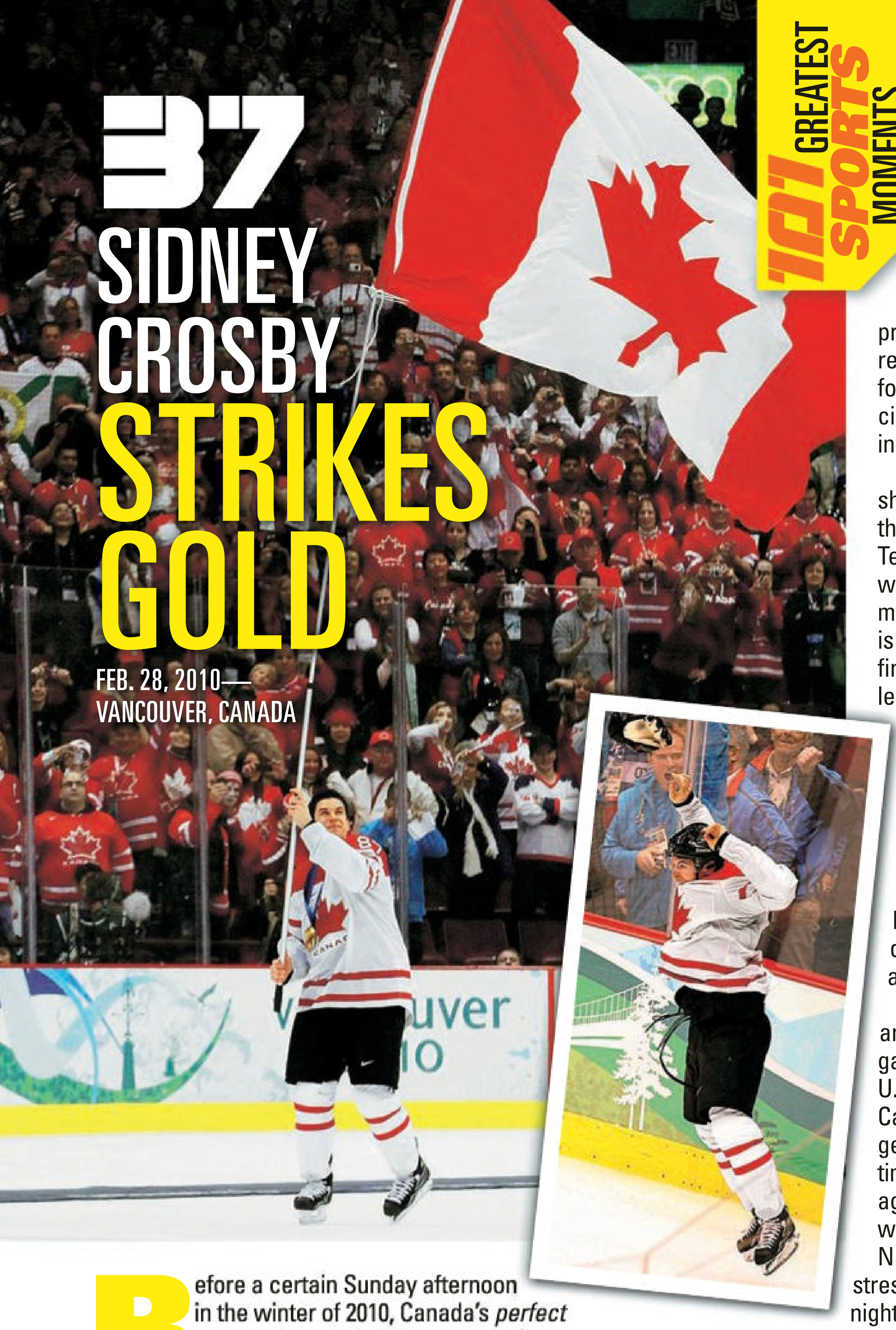
But with no broken bones, Vonn is back. Tenaciously running the entire course two days later with an injured hip and in excruciating pain, she holds a respectable eighth in the Olympic downhill. Vonn will also finish seventh in the super-G and 14th in the slalom. "Not racing was not an option," she says.

There's no podium for her this year, but Vonn's courageous showing earns her something even more singular: the U.S. Olympic Spirit Award—plus, pure awe from her competitors.

"It's a miracle that Lindsey raced today," says gold medal winner Michaela Dorfmeister, who finishes 1.29 seconds ahead of Vonn. "She has my respect."

"She's just beyond anything I've seen in sports," adds NBC Sports' Dan Hicks. "Someone who's done what she'd done, got hurt like she's gotten hurt—then gets back up on the hill. You just don't see that."

Vonn will retire in 2019 as the most successful Alpine skiing World Cup racer. In her 2022 memoir, *Rise*, she says she felt, at times, that the media and her competition unfairly deemed her "dramatic" for her multiple injuries. It touches a nerve, she writes, when male competitors in similar circumstances are praised for being resilient.



37

SIDNEY CROSBY STRIKES GOLD

FEB. 28, 2010—
VANCOUVER, CANADA

Before a certain Sunday afternoon in the winter of 2010, Canada's *perfect moment* has eluded the country since either the 1867 Confederation or 1972's 8th-game, buzzer-beater, Summit Series–winning goal against the Soviet Union in Moscow—depending on who you ask. Marred by numerous *almost* perfect moments (e.g., see #70) and qualified ones (were folks in Chicoutimi dancing in the streets when the Jays won back-to-back World Series, or in Red Deer when Pierre Trudeau won his fourth election?), the nation is hoping today will be different.

Actually, they're banking on it.

The entire country this time, from Cole Harbor, Nova Scotia, to Ucluelet, British Columbia, to Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, and beyond is riding on Canada's biggest home game ever—the men's hockey gold medal finals against Team USA at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics.

"When you're on Team Canada," says team captain Scott Niedermayer to CBC, "there's sort of one expectation—and that's that you win the tournament you're in. Obviously, gold medal on home soil hosting the Olympics is exactly what everybody wants. It's also what the country expects."

"There was a lot of pressure on us to win gold," recalls Team Canada forward Rick Nash. "Especially after our performance in Turin."

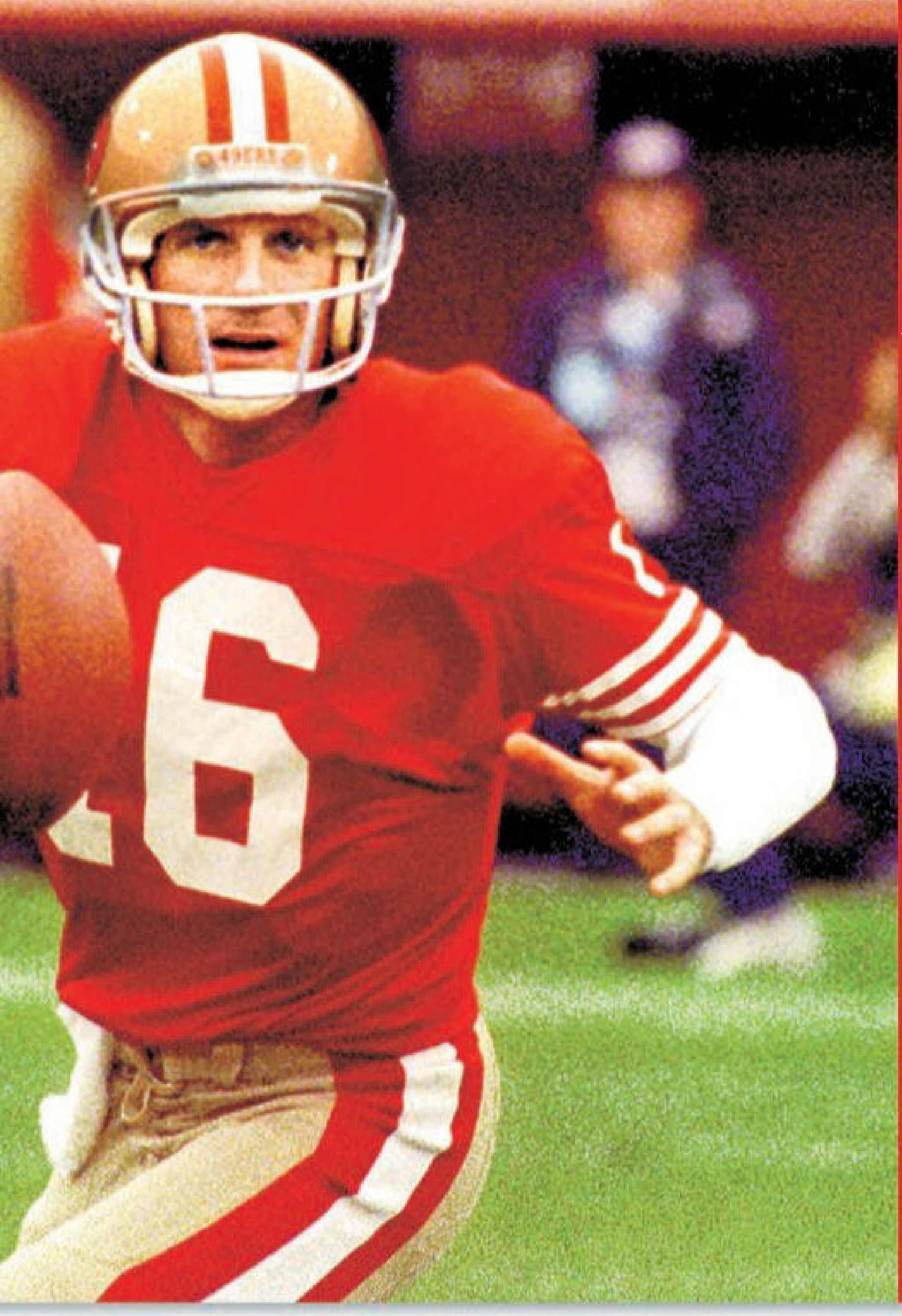
Rebounding from a shocking 7th place finish at the 2006 Turin Olympics, the Team Canada juggernaut with its seven prior gold medals from Olympics past is stacked with the NHL's finest in 2010—including the league's latest young superstar, 22-year-old Sidney Crosby. Squeaking past Switzerland in a shoot-out and losing to Team USA in the preliminary round, though, the heavily favored Canadians haven't exactly been dominating this time around, either.

During the highest-profile and most-watched hockey game in 30 years since the U.S.'s 1980 Miracle on Ice, Canada appears to be getting its groove right on time—taking a 2–0 lead against a U.S. team packed with their own set of top NHLers, feeling a tad less stress. "I slept like a baby [last night]," U.S. winger Patrick Kane tells *The Toronto Star*. "A little bit more pressure on those Canadians guys." That tension spreads to a nationwide audience when the lead is reduced to 2–1 in the third period, before an arena- and nation-silencing goal by U.S. winger Zach Parise with 24.4 seconds left ties it up.

"We had a lot of veteran guys who seemed really poised, and you could feed off that," Sidney Crosby would later tell *nhl.com*, about entering an unexpected gold-medal overtime with an entire hockey-obsessed country's welfare hanging in the balance. "You learn a lot from those situations—and just to see that veteran experience take over and bring that sense of calm, it brought a young player like myself a lot of confidence."

Canada's Golden Goal happens in half a flash.

At 7:40 of overtime, a grinding give-and-go in the U.S. zone with teammate Jarome Iginla feeds Crosby for a point-blank, five-hole shot past American goalie and tournament MVP Ryan Miller. It's too fast to see—before Crosby's gloves are flung in the air, Team Canada is flooding the ice, and jubilant Canadians are weeping with joy and relief from coast to coast. Perfect moment accomplished.



JOE MONTANA DRIVES IT HOME

JAN. 22, 1989—MIAMI, FL

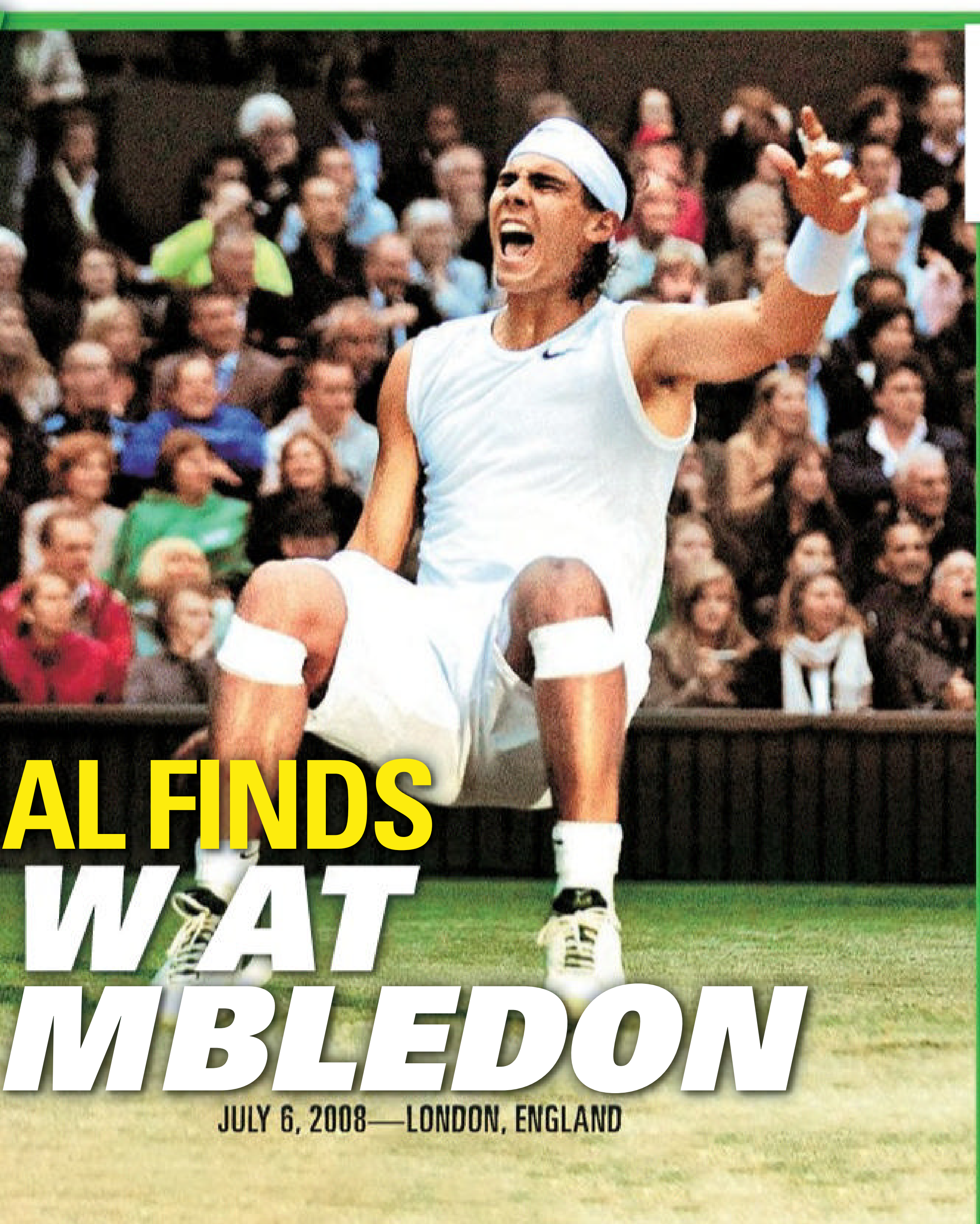
Slated as a grudge match, Super Bowl XXIII between the San Francisco 49ers and a vengeful Cincinnati Bengals over a narrow championship loss seven years earlier has all the makings of…a snoozefest after a painfully slow first half. What doesn't help: a halftime show called "Bee Bop Bamboozled" that proves as disastrously lame as it sounds. It'll take something huge in the second half to resuscitate the most un-super-ish Super Bowl yet.

It begins with a spectacular 93-yard-touchdown run in the third quarter by Cincinnati's Stanford Jennings—the second end-to-end kick return in Super Bowl history. A 40-yard field goal giving the Bengals a three-point lead late in the fourth quarter adds some drama.

But the clincher is the 49ers final drive of the game led by quarterback Joe Montana—engineering the most unflinchingly calm, clutch, end-to-end, do-or-die Super Bowl finish ever.

From his own 8-yard-line with just over three minutes on the clock, the famously unruffled Montana will first inject some levity into his keyed-up offense by pointing out comic actor John Candy in the crowd munching on a bag of popcorn. Then he gets to work, methodically pushing 92 yards with five consecutive passes—including a game-winning touchdown strike to…Jerry Rice? Roger Craig? Nope. Finding overlooked wide receiver John Taylor on a crossing route with 34 seconds to spare, the "Comeback Kid" will cap one of the most dramatic finishes in an NFL championship.

"Joe Montana is not human," Bengals wide receiver Cris Collinsworth will openly lament after the game. "I don't want to call him a god, but he's definitely somewhere in between."



AL FINDS W AT MBLEDON

JULY 6, 2008—LONDON, ENGLAND

Long before it's over, the third installment of the 2006–08 Wimbledon trilogy between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal swiftly becomes an easy nominee for the most epic tennis match ever—complete with rain delays and palpitating tiebreakers. It's the match credited as the inspiration for the documentary *Strokes of Genius*, capturing one of the greatest rivalries in sports.

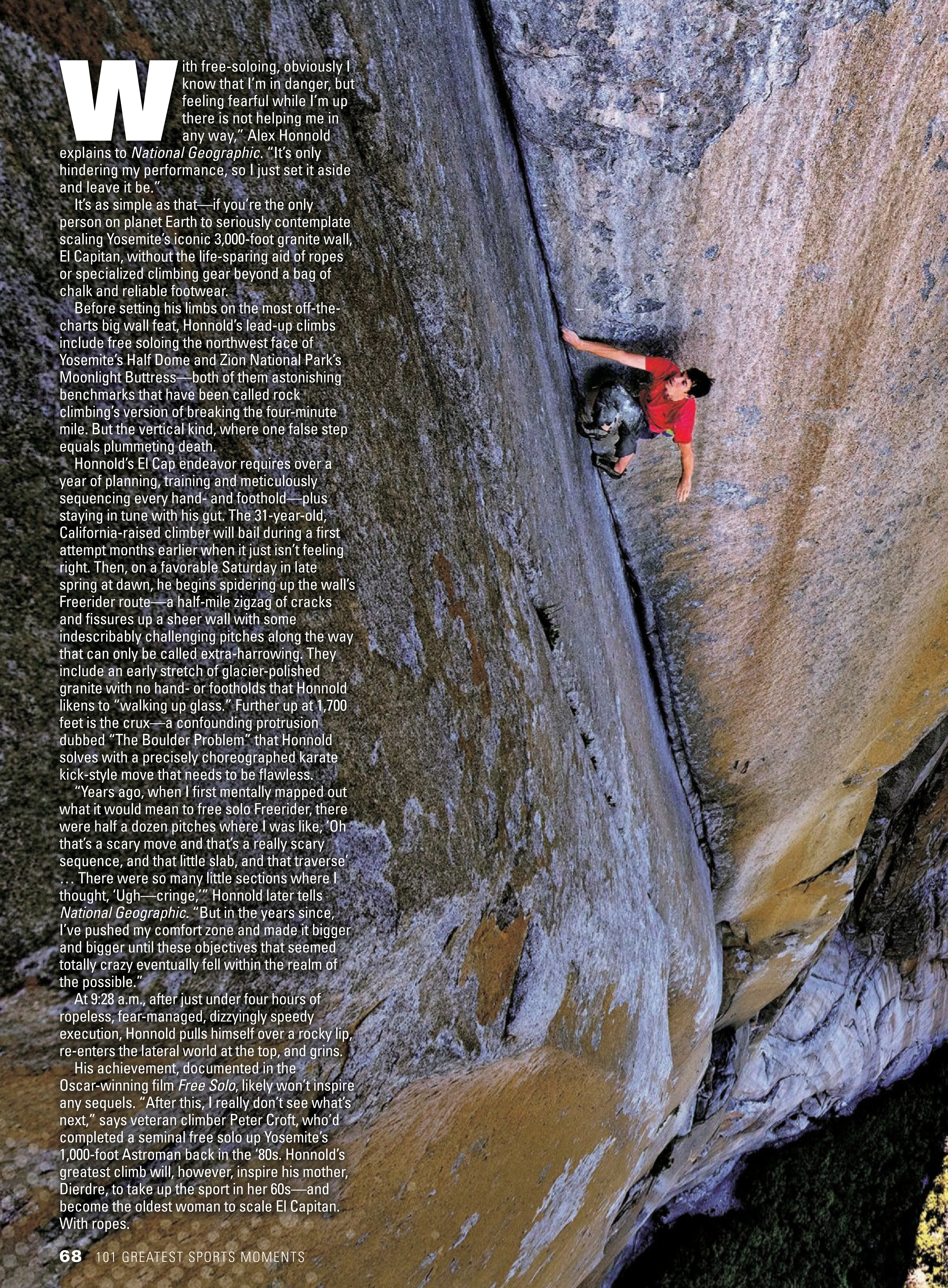
Federer (aka "King of the Grass") should have the advantage going in, with his five consecutive Wimbledon singles titles, including a five-set monster match over Nadal the previous year. But the more immediate lead-up to this year's title is a decisive Nadal victory at the French Open a month earlier, clobbering Federer 6–1, 6–3, 6–0 to win a fourth consecutive title at Roland Garros. In his long swashbuckling shorts and sleeveless shirts, the bullish Spanish underdog is clearly coming for Federer.

A storm forces the Wimbledon 2008 final to get off to a late start, and then rain will delay the match two more times. Nadal wins the first two sets, but Federer rallies and thwarts two championship points before winning a pair of nail-biting tiebreakers. A down-to-the-wire fifth set ends with Federer striking a forehand into the net—drawing to a close a nearly five-hour marathon of a match as darkness descends on the Centre Court.

"This is the greatest match I've ever seen," an attending John McEnroe will be quoted.

Winning his first Wimbledon title—6–4, 6–4, 6–7, 6–7, 9–7—Nadal drops to the grass on his back, in one of the most iconic images in tennis.

"He's still the best," says Nadal in a post-match interview about his opponent. "He's still five-time champion here. Right now I have one. So for me, it's a very, very important day."



With free-soloing, obviously I know that I’m in danger, but feeling fearful while I’m up there is not helping me in any way,” Alex Honnold explains to *National Geographic*. “It’s only hindering my performance, so I just set it aside and leave it be.”

It’s as simple as that—if you’re the only person on planet Earth to seriously contemplate scaling Yosemite’s iconic 3,000-foot granite wall, El Capitan, without the life-sparing aid of ropes or specialized climbing gear beyond a bag of chalk and reliable footwear.

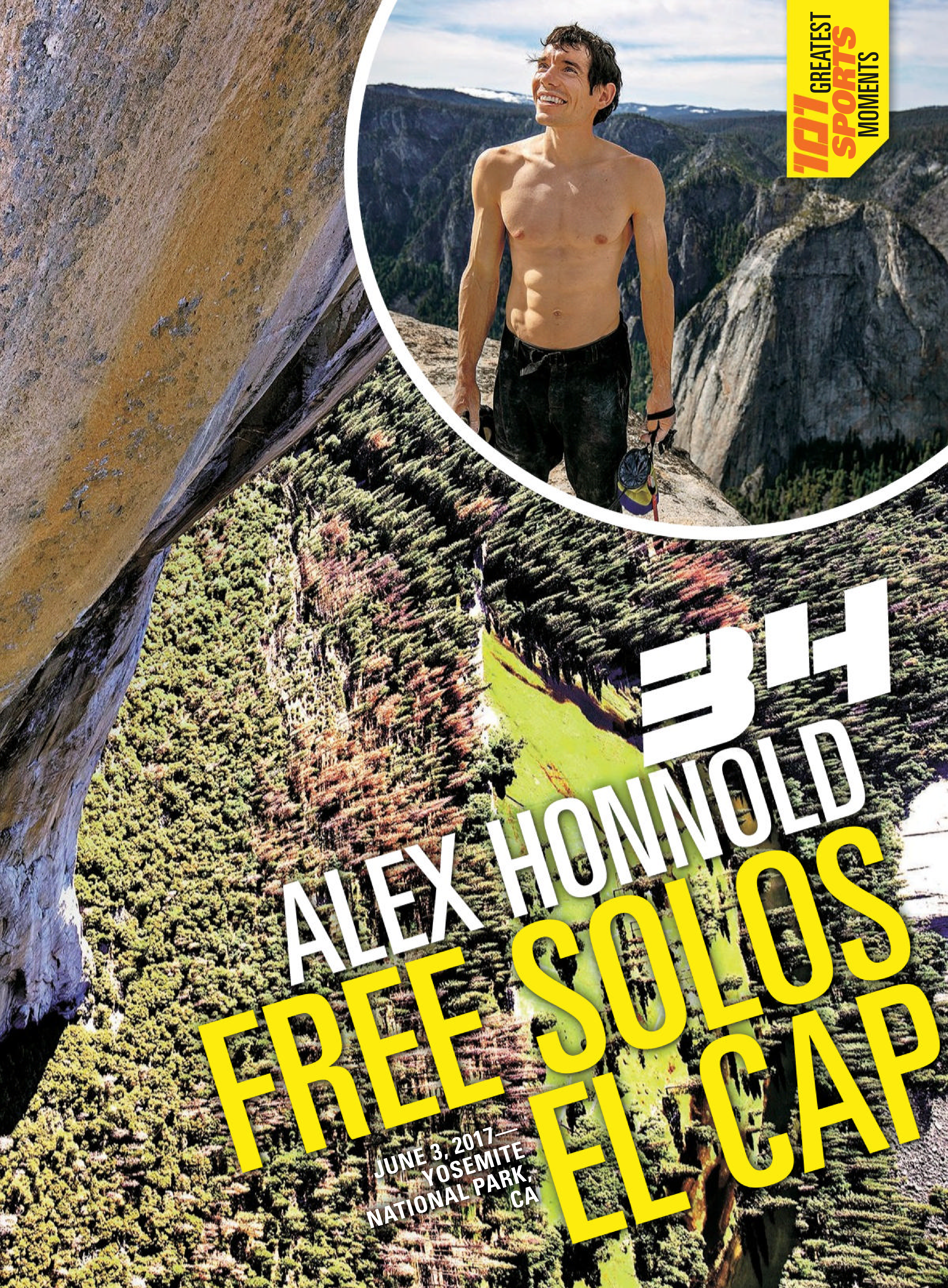
Before setting his limbs on the most off-the-charts big wall feat, Honnold’s lead-up climbs include free soloing the northwest face of Yosemite’s Half Dome and Zion National Park’s Moonlight Buttress—both of them astonishing benchmarks that have been called rock climbing’s version of breaking the four-minute mile. But the vertical kind, where one false step equals plummeting death.

Honnold’s El Cap endeavor requires over a year of planning, training and meticulously sequencing every hand- and foothold—plus staying in tune with his gut. The 31-year-old, California-raised climber will bail during a first attempt months earlier when it just isn’t feeling right. Then, on a favorable Saturday in late spring at dawn, he begins spidering up the wall’s Freerider route—a half-mile zigzag of cracks and fissures up a sheer wall with some indescribably challenging pitches along the way that can only be called extra-harrowing. They include an early stretch of glacier-polished granite with no hand- or footholds that Honnold likens to “walking up glass.” Further up at 1,700 feet is the crux—a confounding protrusion dubbed “The Boulder Problem” that Honnold solves with a precisely choreographed karate kick-style move that needs to be flawless.

“Years ago, when I first mentally mapped out what it would mean to free solo Freerider, there were half a dozen pitches where I was like, ‘Oh that’s a scary move and that’s a really scary sequence, and that little slab, and that traverse’ … There were so many little sections where I thought, ‘Ugh—cringe,’” Honnold later tells *National Geographic*. “But in the years since, I’ve pushed my comfort zone and made it bigger and bigger until these objectives that seemed totally crazy eventually fell within the realm of the possible.”

At 9:28 a.m., after just under four hours of ropeless, fear-managed, dizzyingly speedy execution, Honnold pulls himself over a rocky lip, re-enters the lateral world at the top, and grins.

His achievement, documented in the Oscar-winning film *Free Solo*, likely won’t inspire any sequels. “After this, I really don’t see what’s next,” says veteran climber Peter Croft, who’d completed a seminal free solo up Yosemite’s 1,000-foot Astroman back in the ’80s. Honnold’s greatest climb will, however, inspire his mother, Dierdre, to take up the sport in her 60s—and become the oldest woman to scale El Capitan. With ropes.



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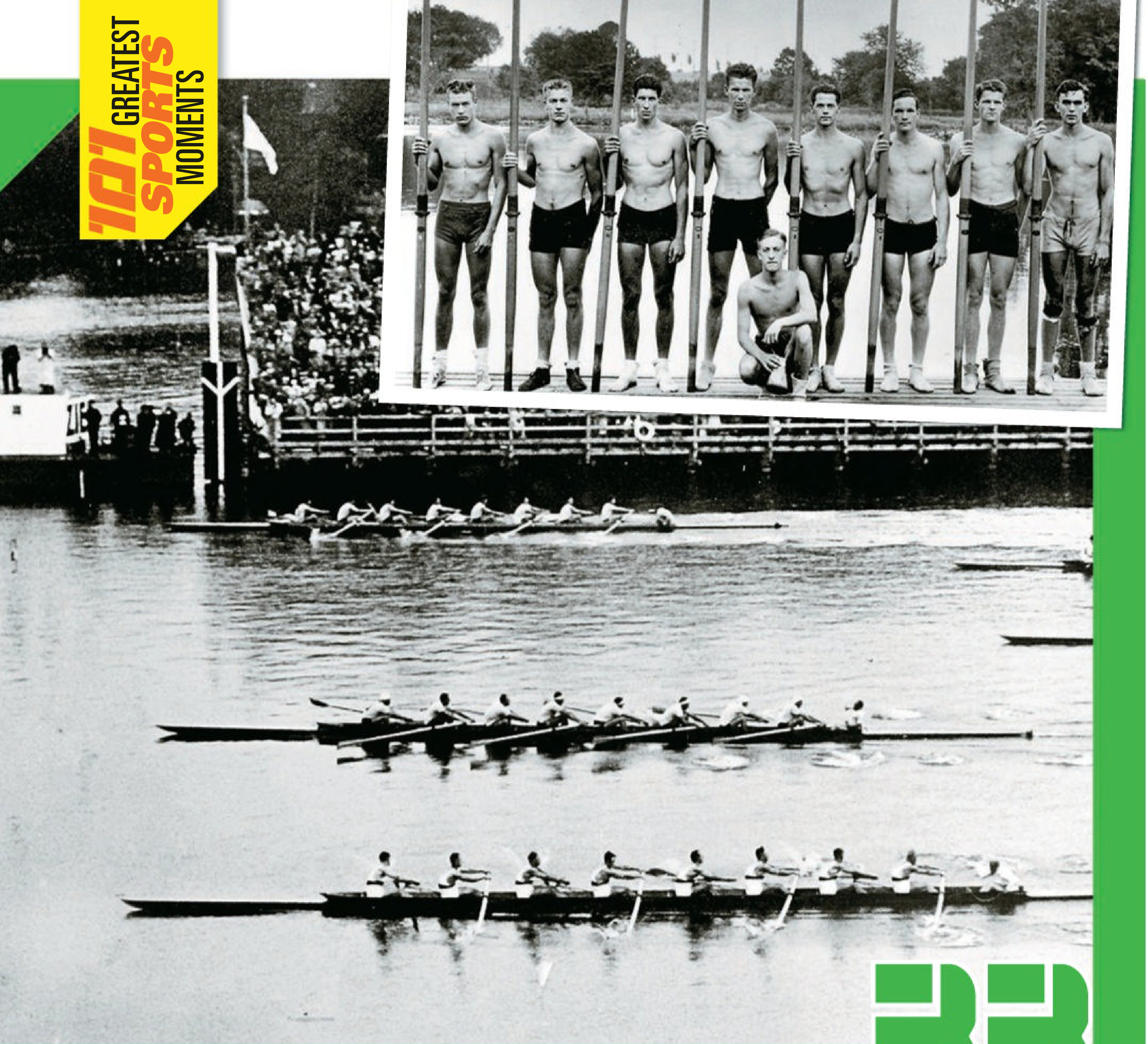
ALEX HONNOLD FREE SOLOS EL CAP

JUNE 3, 2017—YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, CA



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THE BOYS IN THE BOAT

BRING IT ON IN BERLIN

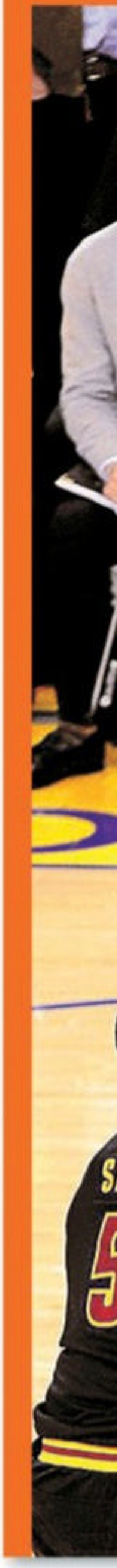
**AUG. 14, 1936—
BERLIN, GERMANY**

Back in an era when varsity rowing regattas generate front-page sports headlines and tens of thousands of fans cheering from the banks, the national championship of perennial underdog, University of Washington, is major news. Especially this year. Rowing past rival UC Berkeley and every A-list Ivy League program, the UW crew of nine working-class undergrads from the Depression-beleaguered American West will now face an even brighter spotlight—representing the U.S. at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

Battling poor positioning and fierce winds, the UW Husky Clipper's thrilling late surge from near last in the 2,000-meter Olympic race to overtake the favored German and Italian boats at the finish line goes down to the last possible fraction of a second.

"Who won?" a wrecked U.S. rower rasps while gliding past bleachers festooned with Nazi flags, cheering Berliners, and Adolf Hitler erroneously pumping his fist in mistaken celebration. When the loudspeaker at Grünau Regatta Course reports the results, the throng immediately hushes and Hitler makes a quick exit.

The U.S. victory, by six-tenths of a second, will turn the University of Washington crew into pre-WWII national heroes. The greatest rowing story ever told will appear nearly 80 years later in Daniel James Brown's bestselling *The Boys in the Boat*—with a George Clooney-directed Hollywood adaptation on deck.



LEBRON REJECTS DEFEAT FOR THE CAVS

JUNE 19, 2016—
OAKLAND, CA

It's the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Golden State Warriors back in the NBA finals in 2016, and no one in Ohio wants to remember what happened between these two teams in 2015. Or in 2007 against the San Antonio Spurs. Or in 36 years of championship drought since the Cavs entered the league in 1970—long before the glorious arrival, departure and rearrival of local hero LeBron James.

Battling back to a final Game 7 from a 3–1 deficit, the Cavaliers are locked in an 89–89 tie with Steph Curry's favored Warriors with two minutes remaining in the tightest game of the championship series.

Coming off a fast break, Curry delivers a smooth bounce pass to Golden State forward Andre Iguodala. The Cavs' J.R. Smith takes an errant swipe at the ball, which forces Iguodala to go for an easy layup instead of smashing down a dunk to break the tie.

Seemingly out of nowhere—he appears, just in time to perform the Rust Belt block of the millennium. LeBron James rises from behind and meets Iguodala at the rim, batting the ball at the backboard in what becomes arguably the NBA's most pivotal rejection.

James is reportedly barreling 20.1 miles per hour down the court when he springs 35 inches in the air for the miraculous block that puts the ball back in Cleveland's possession and changes the momentum of the game.

"I was thinking—J.R., please don't foul him. I'm right there," James will later recount to *Cleveland.com*, about the final chase down largely credited with saving the Cavaliers from yet another almost. "I can get it. I can get it."

Completing its comeback rally, Cleveland closes out with a 93–89 championship-sealing victory. Buoyed by "The Block," the Cavs bring home the city's first major sports title since 1964—the year the Browns won the Super Bowl.

Months later, Iguodala gives James props for the rejection—"Man, that block was so dope to me too. I was a fan."—and rapper Nicki Minaj will go on to immortalize the play in the song "Do You Mind."

The Fi
GOLDEN STATE
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WARRIORS
SMITH
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LEWIS HAMILTON ROCKETS THROUGH THE RAIN

JULY 6, 2008—SILVERSTONE, ENGLAND

It's performances of this caliber that make legends," says *Autosport*, presciently enough, when a 23-year-old Lewis Hamilton wins the 2008 British Grand Prix by a mile (more, actually) in the race that F1's most dominant driver will call the best of his career.

Just one point shy of being the first rookie to win a world title in his debut season in 2007, the British wunder driver for McLaren-Mercedes returns to his home turf at Silverstone Circuit with six victories already in the rear view by mid-2008—and a sea of revved English fans welcoming him under umbrellas.

The weather is British Grand Prix awful—especially behind a McLaren MP4-23 at over 200 kilometers per hour with a foggy visor. Aside from the seeing part, the hometown hero welcomes it all.

"Racing here as a kid, it was always wet," Hamilton will later tell *Top Gear*. "So it was a real good area for me to show my strengths."

He shows them fast, quickly maneuvering from fourth position to second by the first corner. Overtaking his pole position teammate Heikki Kovalainen within four laps, Hamilton never looks back in what will become one of the most competition-smoking F1 races of all time.

While other cars are spinning out in the pouring rain, Hamilton pulls further away, mastering treacherous conditions at speeds that will lead the McLaren crew to urge him to slow it down a notch. Nope. Hamilton says he's fine. This is a comfortable warp-speed pace.

"I didn't want to slow down because the moment you do that, you lose concentration—and I'm not even pushing," Hamilton later recalls. "I had to be sensible. I had to imagine I was 60 seconds ahead and then fell off, and that would've been so embarrassing. There's no way you could come back from that. You'd have to retire! It was just about managing it all."

Hamilton manages to win the race by 68.577 seconds, the widest Grand Prix margin in a quarter century.

It's his seventh victory of what will eventually cruise north of 100 wins. But here's the one that F1 luminaries point to as the most revelatory performance of F1's best driver ever. It's the race that Hamilton himself calls his personal favorite ("It was so much fun—one of the toughest I've done")—while proving that Brits just know how to handle the rain.

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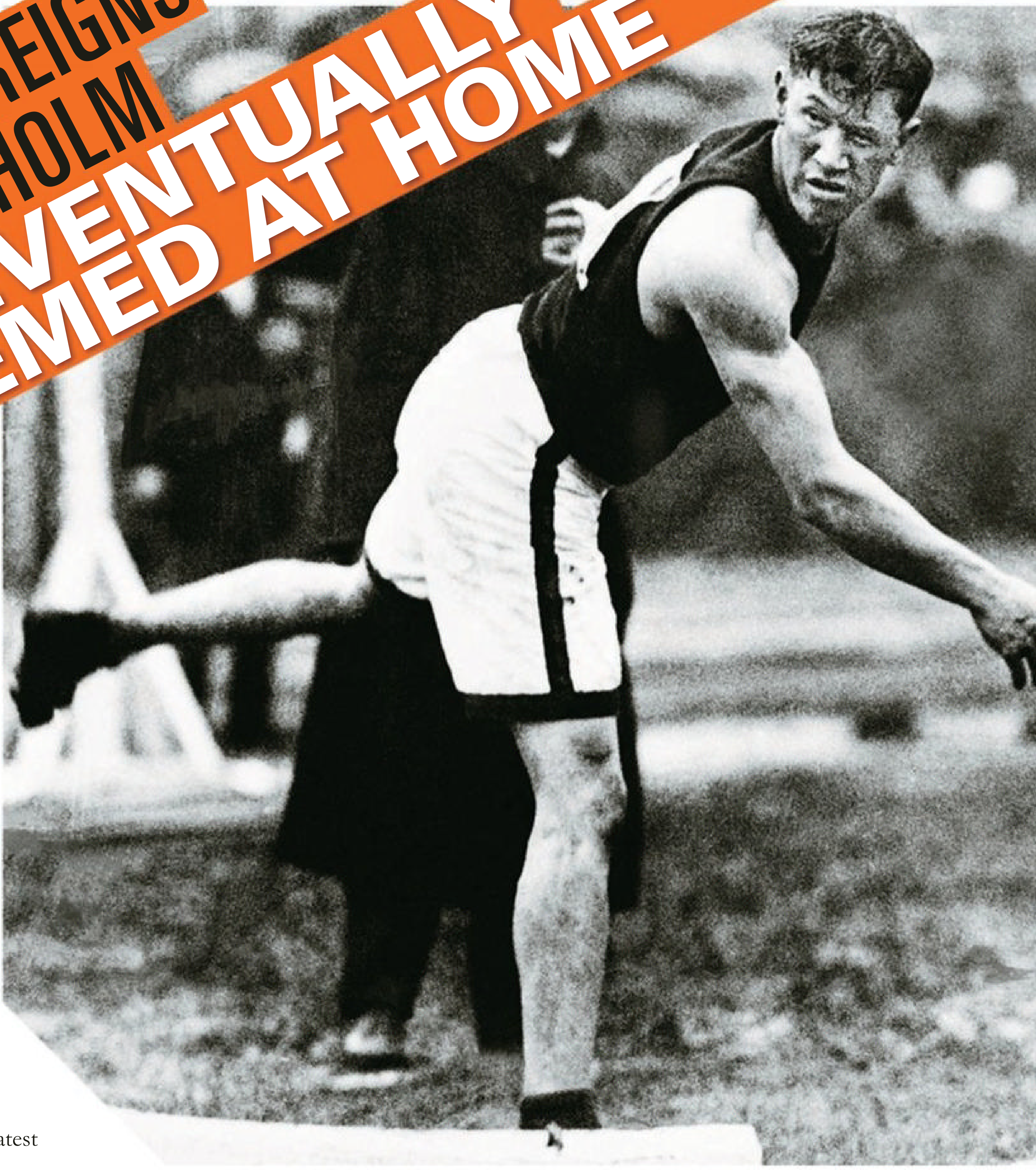
JIM THORPE REIGNS IN STOCKHOLM AND IS EVENTUALLY REDEEMED AT HOME

JULY 7 & 15, 1912
—STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN



"You, sir, are the world's greatest athlete," King Gustav V of Sweden lauds Jim Thorpe during the medal ceremony at the Stockholm Olympics in 1912. That's true enough. Thorpe, the first Native American to win an Olympic gold medal for the United States (despite being deprived of actual American status prior to the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924), has just cleaned house in the pentathlon (July 7) and decathlon (July 15). No other athlete has come close. But King Gustav doesn't know the half of it.

Jim Thorpe isn't just the world's greatest athlete. He's the All-American prototype.

Long before Bo Jackson and Deion Sanders wow crowds with their double football-baseball careers, the original mold is cast by a young man originally named Wa-Tho-Huk ("Bright Path") from Sac and Fox Nation land in present-day Oklahoma, who emerges into the athletic phenomenon known as Jim Thorpe at a government-run Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, PA.

As the story goes, Thorpe's untapped brilliance for virtually every sport he tries his hand at is first discovered at Carlisle when he's asked to join some varsity track athletes practicing the high jump. Soaring over the highest bar in overalls and a dress shirt, he's sent straight to the coach's office.

"Have I done anything wrong?" Thorpe asks the guy in the office.

"Son, you've just broken the school record in the high jump, that's all," says Carlisle's famed track-and-field and football coach, Glenn "Pop" Warner, who quickly recruits Thorpe as his track star and, eventually, star running back, defensive back, placekicker and punter for a dominant college-level football team.

Thorpe will lead Carlisle over Harvard (he'll score all their points) and a West Point Army team that includes a future President Dwight Eisenhower, who'll never forget his one meeting on the gridiron against Thorpe.

"Here and there, there are some people who are supremely endowed," Eisenhower will recall in a 1961 speech. "My memory goes back to Jim Thorpe. He never practiced in his life, and he could do anything better than any other football player I ever saw."

Thorpe will go onto a pro football career with the American Professional Football Association (the future NFL), becoming a major fan draw over seven seasons. He'll play professional baseball with the New York Giants, Cincinnati Reds and Boston Braves. And—circling back to the Olympics before all of this—he'll be tapped as the world's greatest athlete by Swedish royalty. Thorpe's gold medal performance in the pentathlon nearly triples the score of his closest competitor—taking first in the broad jump, 200-meter sprint, 1,500-meter run and the discus throw, with a third place in the javelin. In the decathlon, he scores 8,413 points out of a possible 10,000—beating the next place finisher, Sweden's Hugo Wieslander, by a distant 688 points.

Thorpe's Olympic success will lead to a hero's welcome back in the U.S.—before being stripped of his medals and Olympic accomplishments months later in what will come to be called the first major international sports scandal. The scandal: a chance discovery that Thorpe had been paid (a pittance) to play minor league baseball over two summers—an infringement of the Olympics' draconian amateurism rules at the time, unbeknownst to Thorpe.

Named the greatest athlete of the first half of the 20th century by the Associated Press, Thorpe will be posthumously redeemed by the International Olympic Committee in phases. First in 1982, nearly 30 years after Thorpe's death, the IOC will provide duplicate gold medals to his family. Records of his Olympic victories will then be fully restored in 2022, over a century after they happened.

"He was the earliest international celebrity athlete," says Kate Buford, author of *Native American Son: The Life and Sporting Legend of Jim Thorpe*. "Every four years, we look for another sensation at the Olympics. Well, he was the first, and he set a standard of performance that was phenomenal."

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GREG LEMOND RECLAIMS LE TOUR

JULY 23, 1989—PARIS, FRANCE

The most stunning Tour de France comeback starts well before it even begins. Re-entering the world's top cycling race in 1989, Greg LeMond has hurdled dire odds just to be sitting on a bike again, let alone competing. Nine months after becoming the first American to win the Tour de France, in '86, the champion cyclist would suffer near-fatal injuries after being shot in a freak hunting accident on a family ranch.

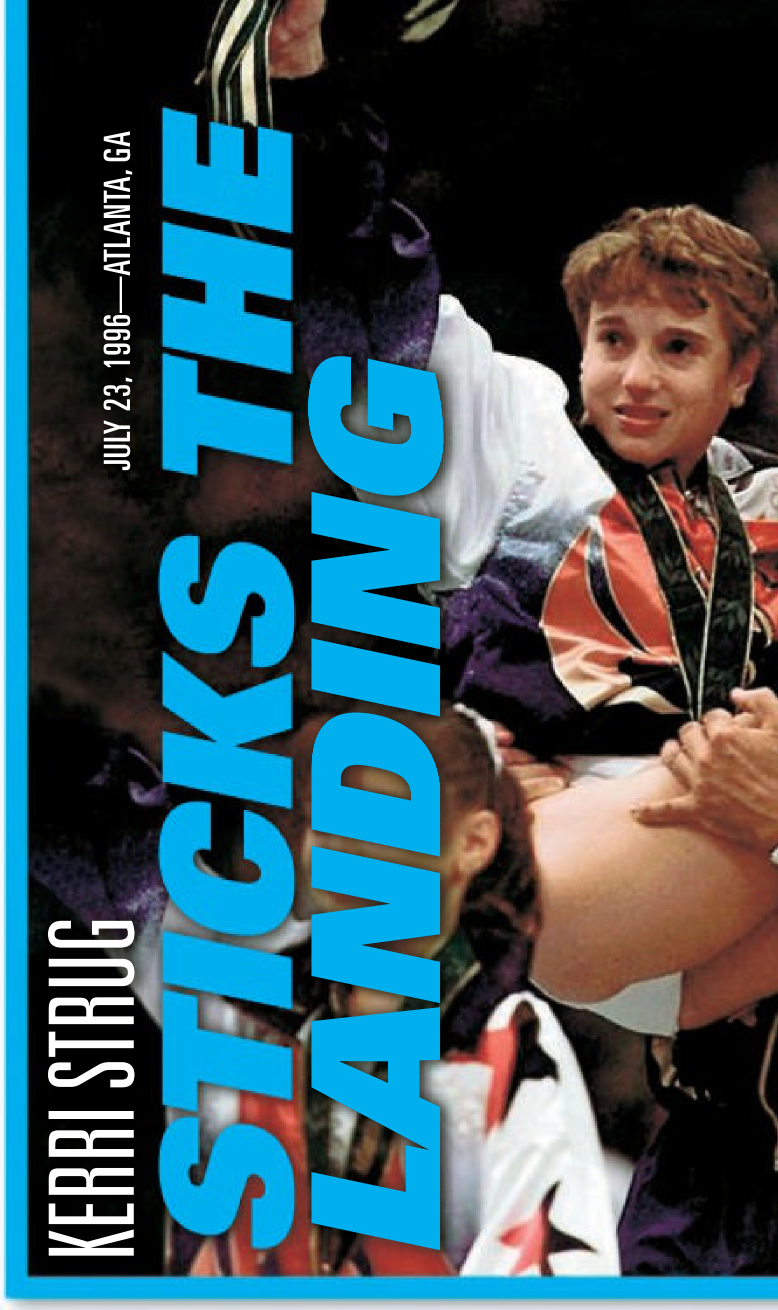
Over two years later, LeMond has fought his way back into pro cycling for the '89 Tour. A top contender again, he enters the sport's most grueling race with buckshot remnants in his heart, back and legs. LeMond's chief competitor this year is France's great hope, Laurent Fignon, a recent two-time Tour de France champion.

The two rival cyclists soon turn the event into a 21-stage game of cat and mouse—repeatedly swapping those roles (and front-runner yellow jerseys) over the course of 23 days and 2,000 miles. On the race's last day, Fignon holds a commanding, 50-second lead going into a final 24.5 km time trial stage from Versailles to Paris. Overcoming this margin is beyond unlikely, and many say unachievable. LeMond is feeling optimistic.

"It's still possible," claims the 28-year-old cyclist, who'll stage the final act of the greatest come-from-behind victory on two wheels.

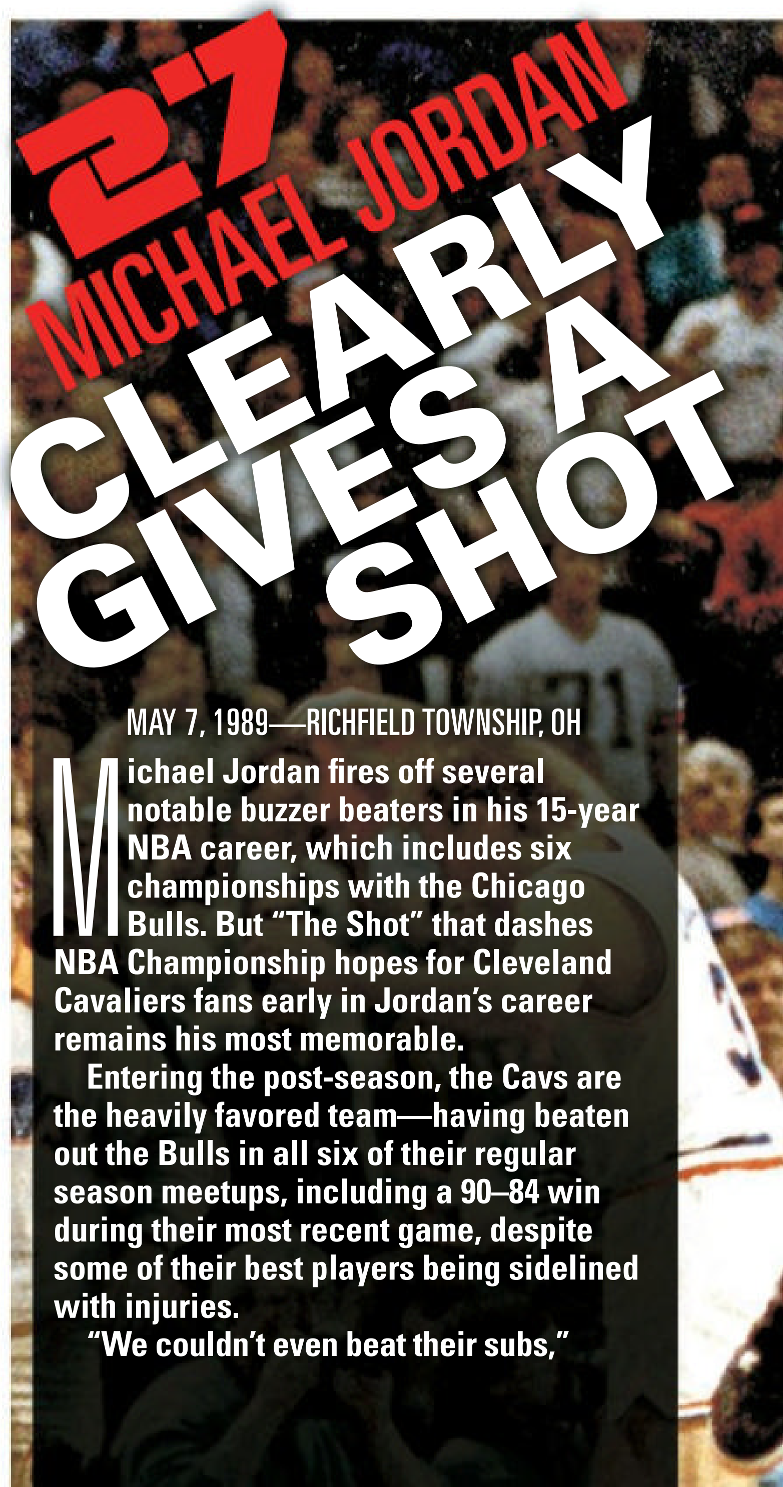
Clocking a record pace of 34 mph during the time trial—and hitting 40 at one point (that's on a bicycle)—LeMond enters locomotive mode, crossing the finish line in under 27 minutes. After a rough start, Fignon will pull off his own fastest time trial pace ever—but not quite fast enough. Shaving off nearly a minute in the final stage, LeMond squeaks out the slimmest margin of victory in Tour de France history. He wins by eight seconds.

The following year, LeMond will defend his Tour title, winning by a less suspenseful two minutes and change.



KERRI STRUG STICKS THE LANDING

JULY 23, 1996—ATLANTA, GA



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MICHAEL JORDAN CLEARLY GIVES A SHOT

MAY 7, 1989—RICHFIELD TOWNSHIP, OH

Michael Jordan fires off several notable buzzer beaters in his 15-year NBA career, which includes six championships with the Chicago Bulls. But "The Shot" that dashes NBA Championship hopes for Cleveland Cavaliers fans early in Jordan's career remains his most memorable.

Entering the post-season, the Cavs are the heavily favored team—having beaten out the Bulls in all six of their regular season meetups, including a 90–84 win during their most recent game, despite some of their best players being sidelined with injuries.

"We couldn't even beat their subs,"

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A shot at gold is looking good—no, great—for the U.S. women's gymnastics team as they head into the final competition at the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta. The "Magnificent Seven" holds a comfortable lead over second-place Russia, with only the vault remaining. But pressure is mounting on the teen gymnasts who have been thrust into the spotlight with hopes to bring home the United States' first-ever team gold medal. The vault is proving particularly tough.

Four U.S. gymnasts make faulty attempts at the vault, but none stick clean landings. Dominique Moceanu goes fifth and falls on both of her vaults. Now all eyes are on Kerri Strug, the diminutive gymnast from Tucson, AZ, who made her Olympic debut four years prior at age 14. On her first vault, Strug lands awkwardly, her ankle buckling underneath her. She winces, her expression calling out in pain. Her coach Béla Károlyi *rallies* her: "Give me one last vault, give me one last good vault." She responds with equal parts duty and resilient battle cry: "I will, I will, I will."

With just one good ankle, Strug speeds down the runway, catapults her 87-pound body in the air, hands pounding the vaulting horse. She twists, flips in the air and nails it clean. Strug raises her arms in triumph, trying to contain agony and a clear physical toll while hopping on one foot to face the judges before being carried off the mat by her coach to the chant of "USA."

Strug's 9.712 vault secures the gold medal for her team. Without her second vault, it turns out team USA would still have won with a razor-thin margin over the Russians. Regardless, her remarkable effort vaults her to fame, talk show appearances and future Wheaties boxes.

In a post-Olympic appearance on the *The Tonight Show*, Strug tells Jay Leno that the Russians were performing on the mat, which moves at a slower pace than the vault, and the scores were still being tallied. With the gold medal in the balance, she persevered through the pain of a sprained ankle. "After the first vault, I heard it crack," a humble Strug tells Leno. "But in gymnastics you hear a lot of cracks and pops."

Strug will be treated for a third-degree lateral sprain and tendon damage after her final vault. She'll never compete in gymnastics again.

Fast-forward to 2021 when four-time Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles withdraws from the team finals, explaining she isn't in the right mental place to continue without risking severe injury. Strug's final vault resurfaces, cast in a new context as commentators and fellow gymnasts point out that generations of young athletes had become conditioned to push through pain in an abusive culture in which they couldn't challenge authority.

"Walking away probably takes even more courage than staying and accepting the adulation—especially in Biles' case, since she was undoubtedly going to add to her medals haul and likely end up as the star of these games," writes *Enterprise-Record* editor Mike Wolcott. "The key part is, she was able to walk away, and she did it before it got too late."

Strug tweets Biles in support and solidarity: "Sending love to you @Simone_Biles," with an accompanying GOAT emoji and a heart.

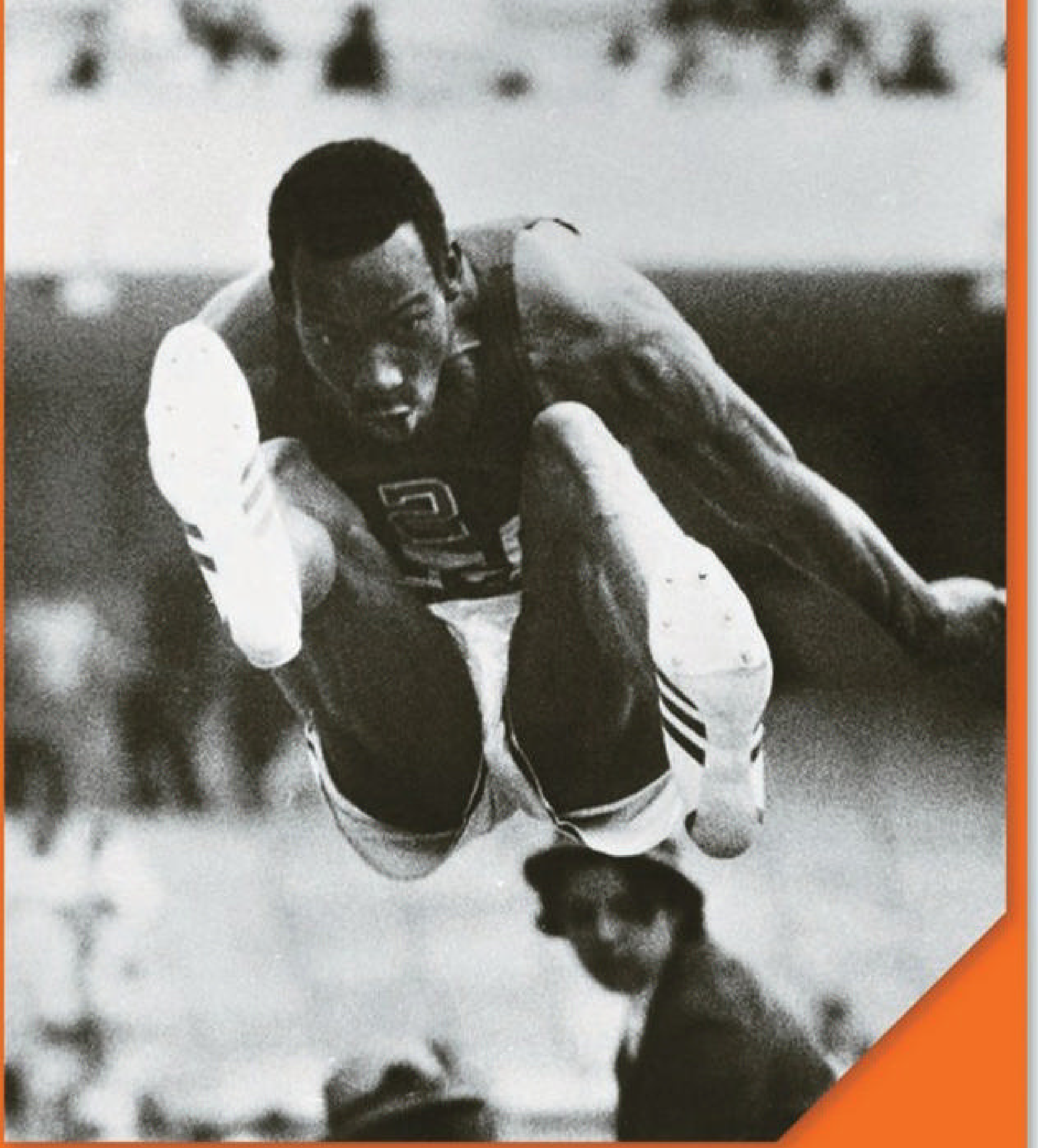
Jordan tells the *Chicago Sun-Times* under a headline that reads: "Bulls resemble cadavers in sorry loss to Cavaliers."

In the first round of the NBA playoff series, the Bulls and Cavs are gridlocked at 2–2. With six seconds remaining in Game 5, Jordan pulls up over Larry Nance and hits a clutch jumper to give Chicago a one-point lead. Craig Ehlo then scores a layup on a smooth give-and-go, reclaiming the lead for the Cavs.

Coming off a time-out with three seconds on the clock, Jordan is naturally double-teamed. He cuts to get open for an inbound pass, sets up for a jumper at the foul line, drifts in the air long enough to evade Ehlo's block attempt, releases at the buzzer—and you know the rest. "The Shot" gives the Bulls a spectacular 101–100 win, advancing them to the finals.

After the game, Bulls coach Doug Collins will share what was said during the final time-out: "Get the ball to Michael and everybody get the [expletive] out of the way!"

Honorable mention: Jordan's cool-as-anything championship-winning "Last Shot" in the 1998 NBA Finals. With 5.2 seconds left, Jordan silences a Utah Jazz crowd—ending one of the most intense and iconic games in league history. The basket clinches the Bulls their last championship to date, as well as the highest-ever TV rating of an NBA game.



Bob Beoman BREAKS THE BOUND BARRIER

OCT. 18, 1968—MEXICO CITY, MEXICO

28 feet. For much of the 20th century, that's been the long jump's magic number. Its four-minute mile. Even the greatest Olympians haven't come close. In 1935, Jesse Owens set a record of 26 feet 8¼ inches in the long jump which stood for 25 years. From 1960 to 1967, the record would be repeatedly broken or tied eight times, eventually reaching 27 feet, 4¾ inches. But 28 feet remains as elusive as ever.

When U.S. long jumper Bob Beoman tears down the runway at the '68 Mexico City Olympics and hurls himself higher and farther than anyone before him, the new long jump record setter is nowhere near 28 feet, either.

He has surpassed it. 29 feet, 2½ inches.

"With one jump, Beoman transformed all ideas of what is humanly possible in his event—and by implication, in all others," sports editor Mel Watman will write in *Athletics Weekly* after witnessing the astonishing moment firsthand.

The most otherworldly new world record will cause some immediate on-site complications. Beoman's leap is so over the top that the standard measuring device isn't designed to record a jump of this length. Olympic officials scramble to measure it manually.

When the number "9" is posted on the electronic board, the packed stadium responds with a collective gasp. Beoman himself falls to the ground when he sees it, overwhelmed by what he's just done. He'll then be congratulated by Welsh jumper Lynn Davies, the defending Olympic gold medalist, who informs him what else he's done: "You have destroyed this event," Davies tells the new champion and world record holder.

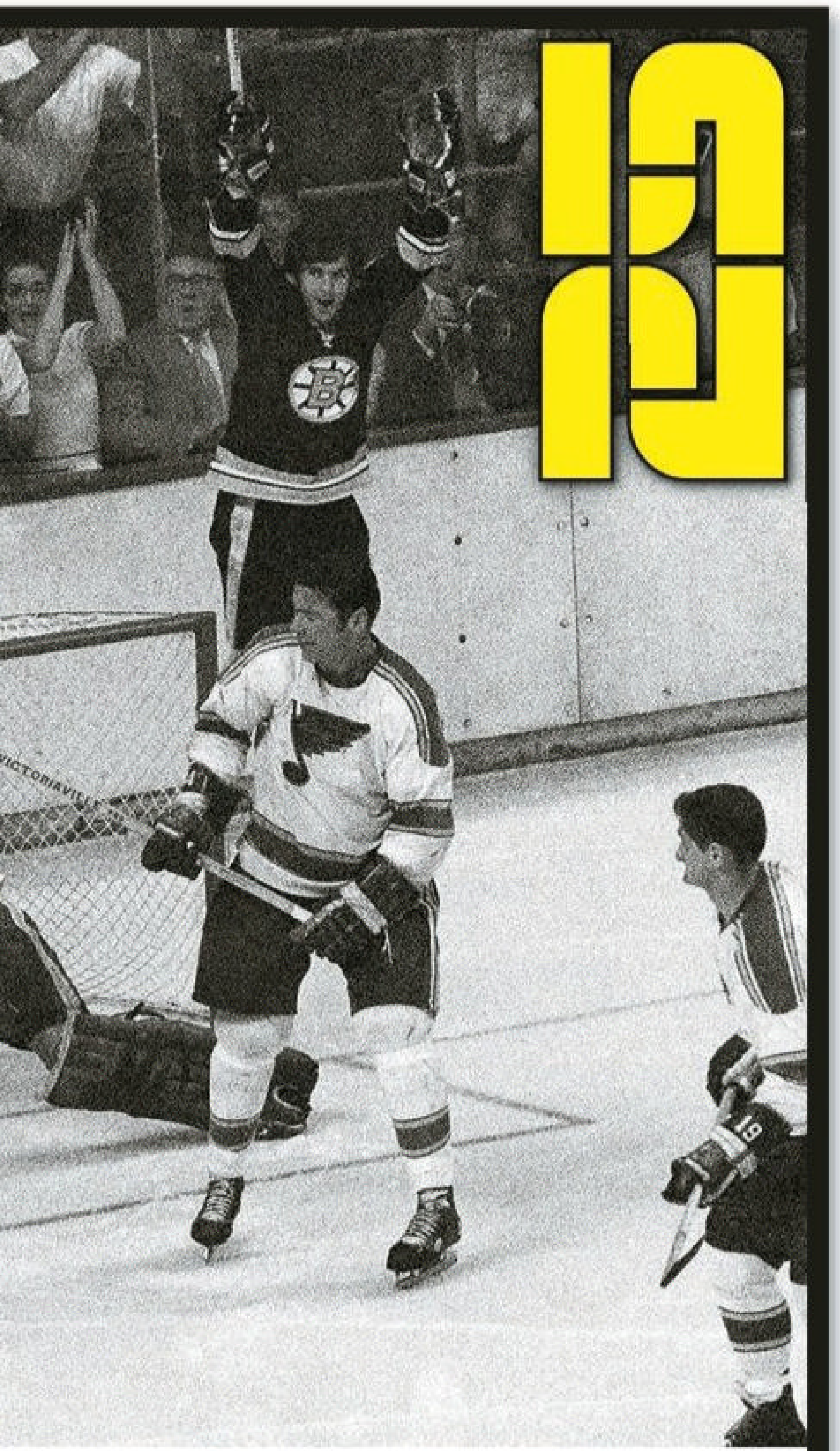
The jump, considered unapproachable let alone unbeatable, will launch a new term, "Beomanesque," to describe any yardstick-destroying achievement.

But the impossible does eventually happen. On Aug. 30, 1991, U.S. jumper Mike Powell's jump of 29 feet 4⅜ inches at the Tokyo World Championships will squeak out a new world record that hasn't been touched since. Beoman's jump remains an Olympic record and the second-longest wind-legal leap in history.

26

Bobby Orr TAKES FLIGHT

MAY 10, 1970
—BOSTON, MA



The ailing Boston Bruins are expecting good things when they draft 18-year-old Bobby Orr in 1966. The rookie sensation will over-deliver—swiftly becoming the NHL's greatest offensive defenseman ever, while pretty much inventing the concept. Leading a team that hasn't qualified for the playoffs in a decade or won a championship in nearly three decades, Orr brings the Bruins back to the Stanley Cup Finals in 1970.

A scoring machine with numerous records that stand over half a century later, Orr remains ecstatically and horizontally frozen in time during one of hockey's most famous goals.

On the verge of sweeping the St. Louis Blues, the Bruins need just 40 seconds of sudden-death overtime in Game 4 to seal the deal. Leaving his blue line post and risking deep play in the Blues zone, Orr sets up a quick give-and-go with teammate Derek Sanderson that sends the defensive star hurtling toward the net and sliding the puck through the legs of St. Louis goalie Glenn Hall—before being tripped and sent flying by a late Blues defenseman after the play.

Sailing through the air euphorically like the Stanley Cup–winning Superman he instantly becomes in Boston, Orr's triumphant flyer captured by photographer Ray Lussier remains the NHL's most iconic image—and a goal credited for bringing the Bruins back to dominance and re-sparking New England's enduring hockey craze.

DON BRADMAN BATS HIS BEST 383 MINUTES

JULY 11, 1930—LEEDS, ENGLAND

The greatest batsman in the history of Test cricket (and the only Australian to ever be knighted for his services to the sport), Don Bradman will rarely have a sub-superb day at the wicket during a 20-year career that's said to have single-handedly altered Australia's relationship to what used to be called the "mother country."

His debut Test tour of England gives the home team a horrifying taste of what's to come. England is favored to win the 1930s Ashes series, until they're introduced to Bradman's bat. During the 21-year-old's first Test appearance in England, Bradman hits 131. In his second, he scores 254.

His most unforgettable performance, during the third match at Headingley Cricket Ground in Leeds, still inspires head shaking and contemporary Aussie folk-rock lyrics (see below). The unassuming 5'7" newbie bats a century before lunch, another before tea, and closes out the day belting 309 runs in a single day's massacre. It's the first triple century in a day—and he's not done yet.

"A good bit of practice for tomorrow," Bradman quips later in the dressing room, before continuing on the following morning with 25 more runs. His record tally: 334 runs during 383 minutes of batting.

"When he ever did stop scoring for a few balls, it was as though he had merely run out of nails momentarily," describes famed cricket writer Neville Cardus in the *Manchester Guardian*. "Bradman's innings was the most remarkable I've ever seen."

Four years later, back at Headingley, Bradman will punish England again with his second career triple century, one of only four cricketers to repeat the feat. His career Test batting average of 99.94—nearly twice that of the closest competitor—will likely never be surpassed. "It's the greatest achievement by any sportsman in any major sport," writes biographer Brett Hutchins in *Don Bradman: Challenging the Myth*.

A famously reluctant hero ("any cricket player is merely a temporary trustee of a great game," he'd say) and embarrassed by all accolades, Bradman will be constantly batted with them throughout his long life and afterward. His image will be on postage stamps and coins.

"The greatest living Australian," Prime Minister John Howard calls the 88-year-old Bradman, four years before the hallowed cricketer's passing. "The most acclaimed Australian of our time," eulogizes Governor-General Sir William Deane.

"He was more than just a batsman, he was something like a tide, he was more than just one man, he could take on any side…," croons Australian folk singer and songwriter Paul Kelly in the only 21st-century song dedicated to a Depression-era cricketer…"They always came for Bradman 'cause fortune used to hide in the palm of his hand."

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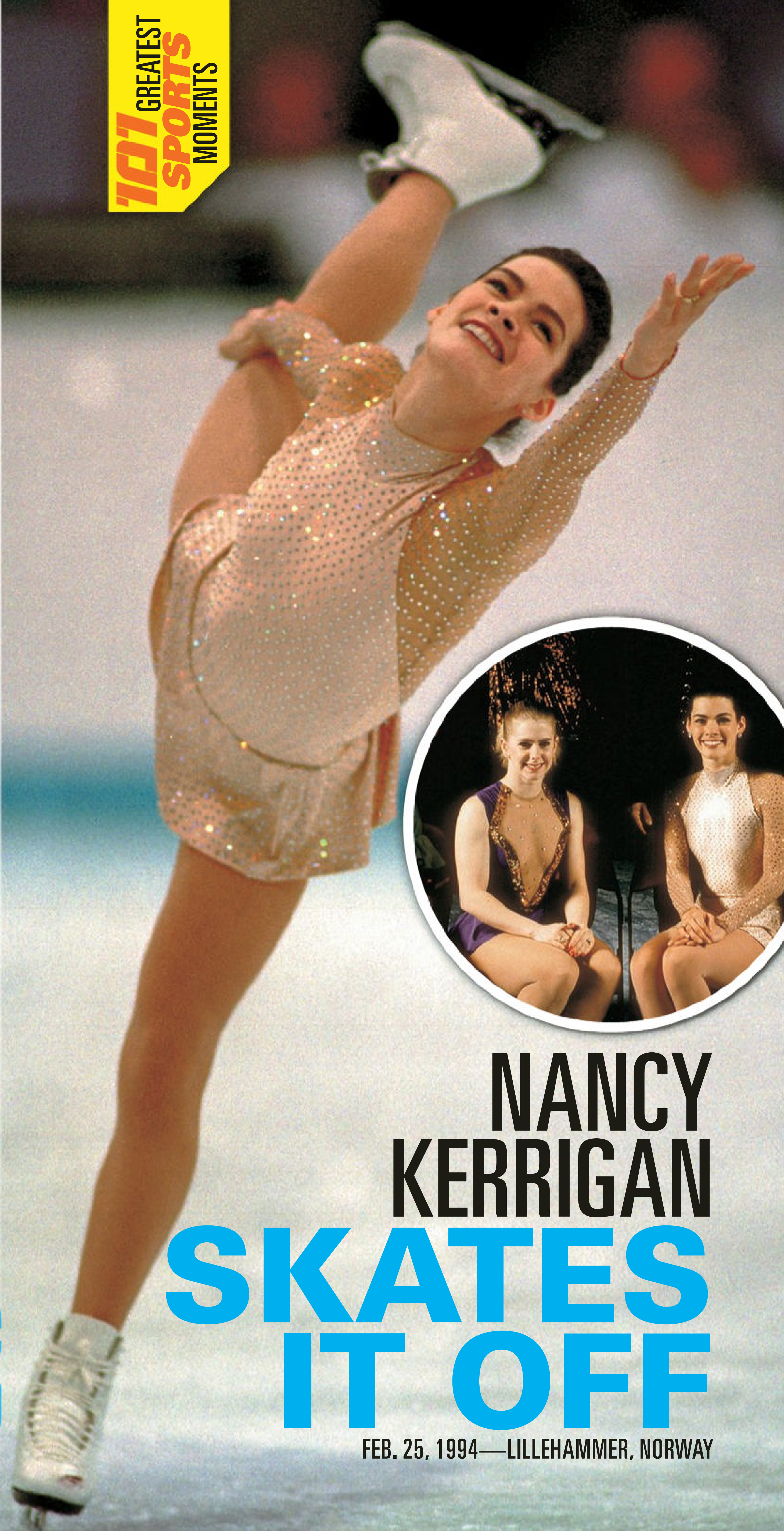
NANCY KERRIGAN SKATES IT OFF

FEB. 25, 1994—LILLEHAMMER, NORWAY



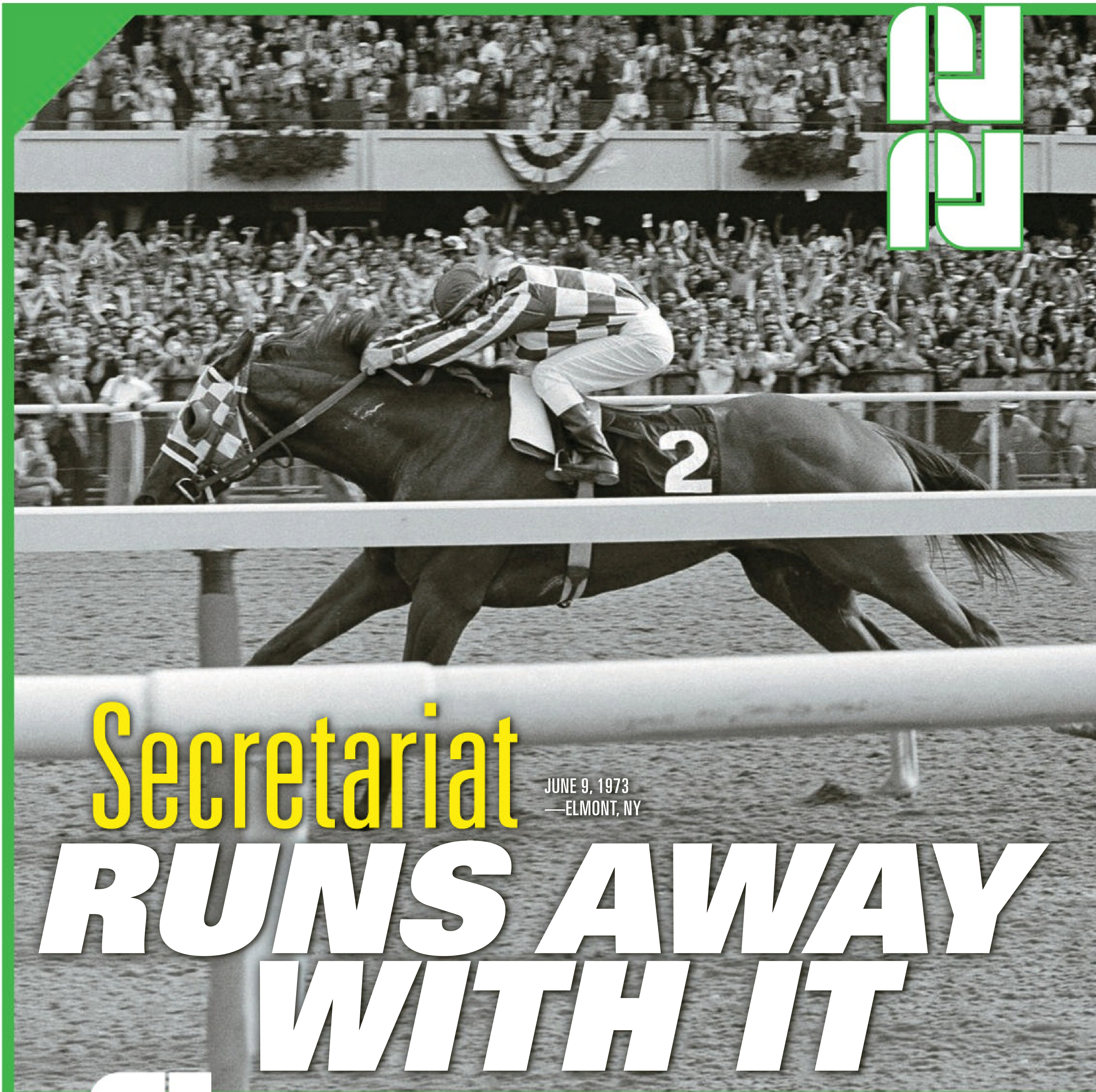
The lead-up to the 1994 Olympics reads like a script ripped from a soap opera directed by the Coen Brothers. Nancy Kerrigan, a gold medal favorite, wraps a training session the day before the Olympic trials in Detroit. Before she leaves Cobo Hall, she pauses to answer a reporter's question and is bludgeoned by an unknown assailant in a black leather jacket, striking her knee with a metal baton before fleeing the arena. The Olympic hopeful crumples to the ground, sobbing: "Why? Why? Why? Why me?"

The unhinged answer to her question will arrive later: vicarious Olympic greed. Four amateur hooligans, including the ex-husband of Kerrigan's rough-and-tumble rival Tonya Harding, go to prison for their roles in the attack that was intended to clear a path to glory for Harding.

Harding denies having any involvement in the attack but pleads guilty to conspiring to hinder prosecution. She pays a fine and is sentenced to probation and community service. In a 2018 interview with ABC News, Harding admits she knew "something was up" leading up to the infamous attack.

If the blow to Kerrigan's leg landed lower, it would have shattered her knee cap. The injury leaves the now-nationally beloved skater with bruises severe enough that she can't compete in the '94 U.S. Figure Skating Championships—where Harding wins gold (her ticket to the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway). Other teammates then step aside so a recovered Kerrigan can compete in the upcoming Games.

TV ratings soar as women's figure skating becomes the most talked about event at this year's Olympics. Kerrigan skates to silver behind Ukraine's Oksana Baiul—with plenty of U.S. speculation that she would've won gold if it weren't for the clubbing. Harding finishes eighth.



Secretariat RUNS AWAY WITH IT

JUNE 9, 1973
—ELMONT, NY

Almost everywhere he races, Secretariat sets records and leaves his opponents in the also-ran bin. But Big Red's most riveting run happens at the '73 Belmont Stakes where the three-year-old Thoroughbred gallops against history in addition to four soon-to-be smoked horses on the track.

"Secretariat is alone. He is moving like a tremendous machine!" track announcer Chic Anderson exclaims. "He's 25 lengths in front!"

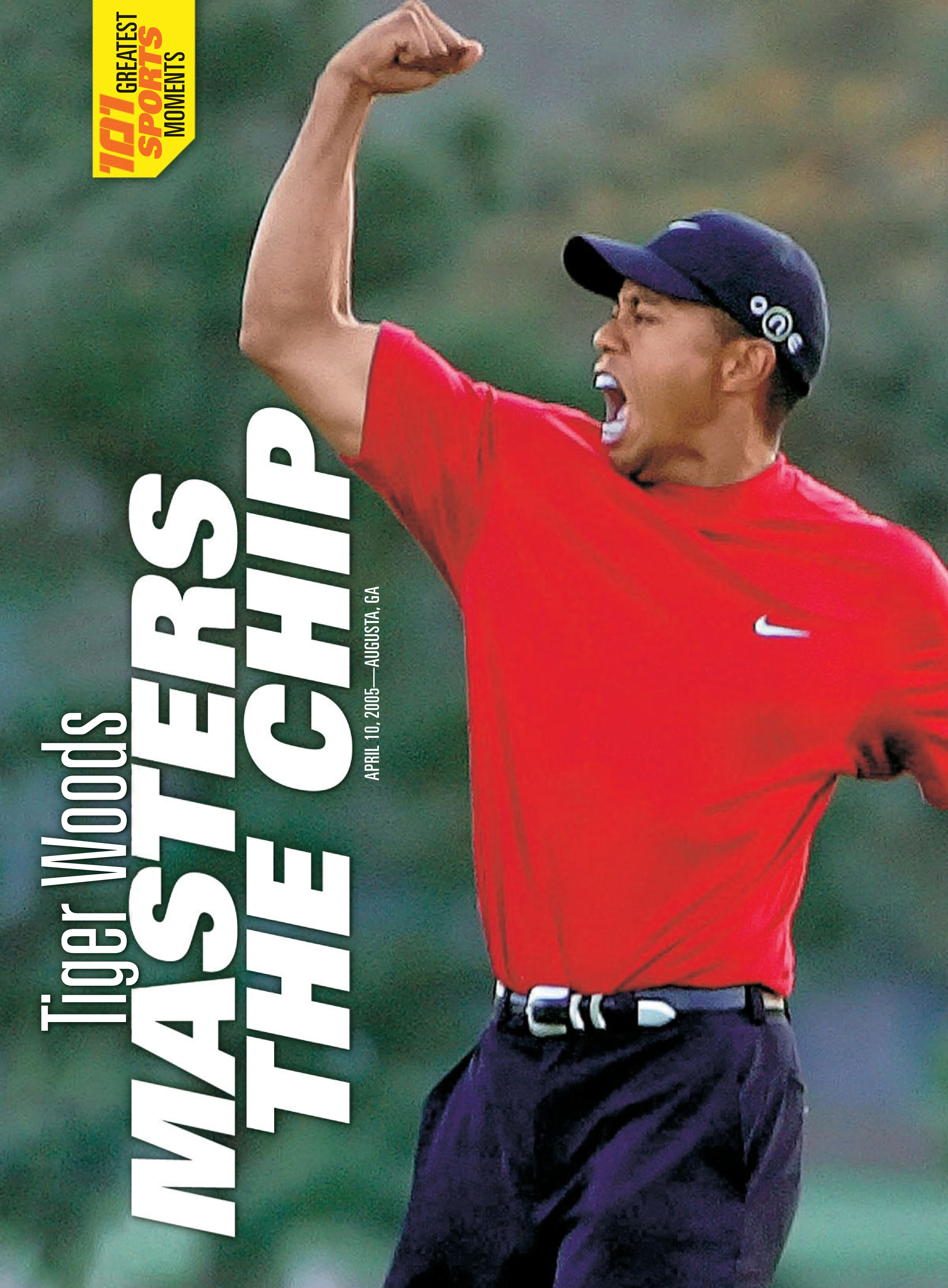
The chestnut colt glides past the finish line an astounding 31 lengths in front of the second-place finisher, Twice a Prince. He sets a world-record 2:24 for the $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles, knocking three seconds off the track record.

"Riding him was like flying a fighter jet compared to an ordinary airplane," Secretariat's jockey Ron Turcotte tells CNN decades later.

With the runaway victory at the Belmont Stakes, Secretariat becomes the first horse since Citation in 1948 to win America's coveted Triple Crown: the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness and the Belmont Stakes. He's also the first to do so on television, building his fan base and providing a distraction from news media subsumed with Vietnam and Watergate.

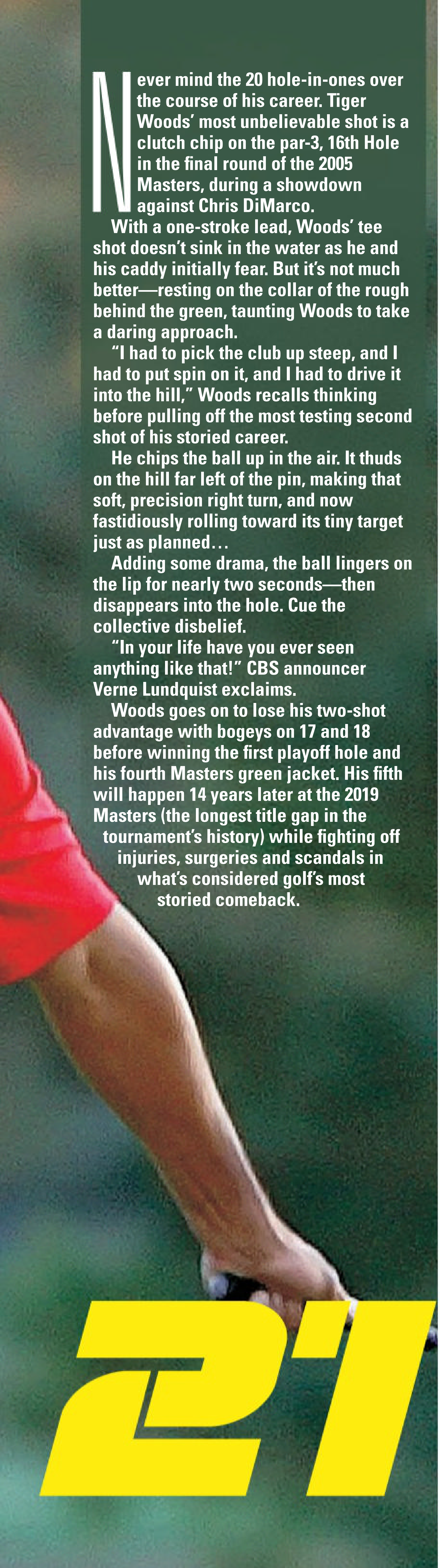
Secretariat is "the only honest thing in the country," says writer George Plimpton. "Where the public so often looks for the metaphor of simple, uncomplicated excellence, the big red horse has come along and provided it."

In 1989, when Secretariat dies at age 19, an autopsy will reveal the likely secret to his stamina: The average Thoroughbred's heart weighs about 8.5 pounds; Secretariat's is nearly three times that number.



Tiger Woods MASTERS THE CHIP

APRIL 10, 2005—AUGUSTA, GA



Never mind the 20 hole-in-ones over the course of his career. Tiger Woods' most unbelievable shot is a clutch chip on the par-3, 16th Hole in the final round of the 2005 Masters, during a showdown against Chris DiMarco.

With a one-stroke lead, Woods' tee shot doesn't sink in the water as he and his caddy initially fear. But it's not much better—resting on the collar of the rough behind the green, taunting Woods to take a daring approach.

"I had to pick the club up steep, and I had to put spin on it, and I had to drive it into the hill," Woods recalls thinking before pulling off the most testing second shot of his storied career.

He chips the ball up in the air. It thuds on the hill far left of the pin, making that soft, precision right turn, and now fastidiously rolling toward its tiny target just as planned…

Adding some drama, the ball lingers on the lip for nearly two seconds—then disappears into the hole. Cue the collective disbelief.

"In your life have you ever seen anything like that!" CBS announcer Verne Lundquist exclaims.

Woods goes on to lose his two-shot advantage with bogeys on 17 and 18 before winning the first playoff hole and his fourth Masters green jacket. His fifth will happen 14 years later at the 2019 Masters (the longest title gap in the tournament's history) while fighting off injuries, surgeries and scandals in what's considered golf's most storied comeback.

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Bill Mazeroski HAS THE LAST BLAST

OCT. 13, 1960—PITTSBURGH, PA

20

Facing one of baseball's scariest lineups ever, the Pittsburgh Pirates will let up a record 55 runs to the Mickey Mantle- and Yogi Berra-led Yankees of the 1960 World Series—losing 16–3, 10–0 and 12–0. To their storm-worthy credit, the Pirates have kept themselves afloat with three squeaker wins to bring this mismatch to a winner-take-all final game.

Game 7 is a doozy—a tumultuous swingfest that has the Pirates finding their own offense after the usual Yankee onslaught to hold the game to a 9–9 tie in the ninth inning.

A packed Forbes Field in Pittsburgh is yearning to taste the team's first championship since 1925 and erase decades of laughingstock status. In the '50s, the Pirates were the inspiration of the original Hollywood version of *Angels in the Outfield*—about a pro baseball team in need of godly intervention to win.

Leading off for Pittsburgh in the bottom of the ninth, 24-year-old second baseman Bill Mazeroski intervenes instead, launching a second pitch deep, deep, deep to left-center…and over the ivy-covered wall.

Mazeroski's shot—the greatest one ever, say Western Pennsylvanians—remains the one and only Game 7 homer to end a World Series in MLB history.

The hit will also buy another decade with Pirates fans until the team wins another couple of titles in the '70s.

"The home run took a while to sink in," Mazeroski will recollect. "All I could think of was, 'We beat the Yankees! We beat the Yankees!'"

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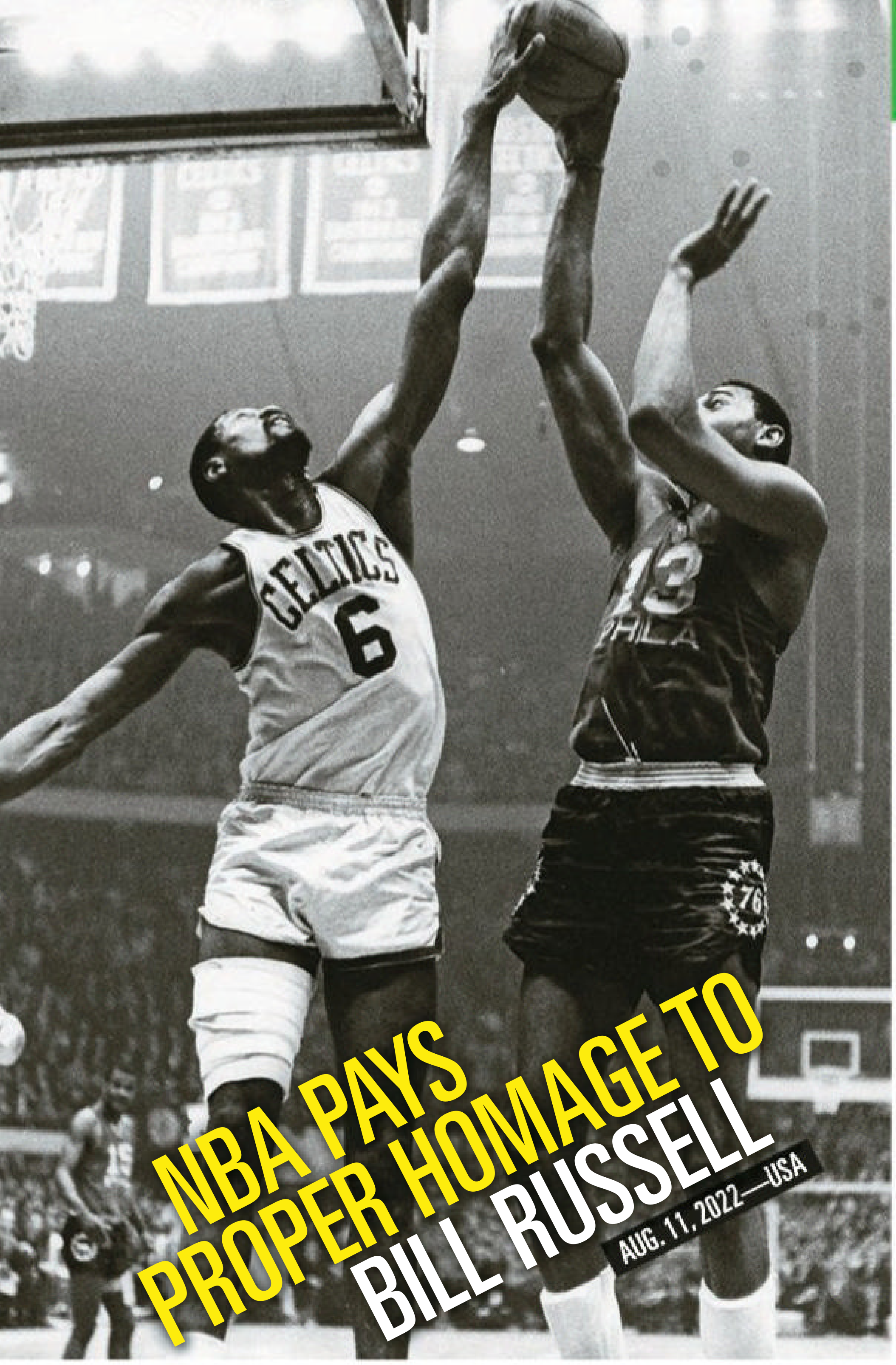


NBA PAYS PROPER HOMAGE TO BILL RUSSELL

AUG. 11, 2022—USA

The greatest mark of a champion athlete transcends the field, the pitch and the court.

On July 31, 2022, when Bill Russell passes away at the age of 88, the greatest of the greats leaves a legacy surpassing his own unmatchable record in sports.

Warming up with back-to-back national championships at the University of San Francisco and a gold medal with the 1956 U.S. Olympic Men's Basketball Team, the 6'10" center will lead the Boston Celtics to 11 championships during his 13-season career from 1956 to 1969—a success rate no other NBA player is ever likely to approach. Named league MVP five times, Russell will then become the first Black head coach in U.S. professional sports, leading the Celtics to a pair of titles in his final two years on the court as a player-coach before being inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame for both roles.

With all that, it's the towering individual beyond the superstar who'll leave the most indelible impact.

"He endured insults and vandalism, but he kept on focusing on making the teammates who he loved better players, and made possible the success of so many who would follow," says President Barack Obama in 2011, when presenting Russell with the Presidential Medal of Freedom and emphasizing Russell's life outside of his athletic accomplishments. "I hope that one day, in the streets of Boston, children will look up at a statue built not only to Bill Russell the player, but Bill Russell the man."

As a lifelong human rights activist, Russell will fight against racial inequality both in and outside of professional sports. He'll march with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in Washington. He'll personally defend Muhammad Ali's refusal to fight in Vietnam, meeting with the boxer to support his civil rights and religious freedom. In his 80s, he'll take a knee in solidarity with NFL protesters—"to stand tall against social injustice," Russell writes. And in 1961 he'll lead the first civil rights boycott of a professional sports game in America when two teammates are refused service at a hotel café in Lexington, KY, before a pre-season exhibition game.

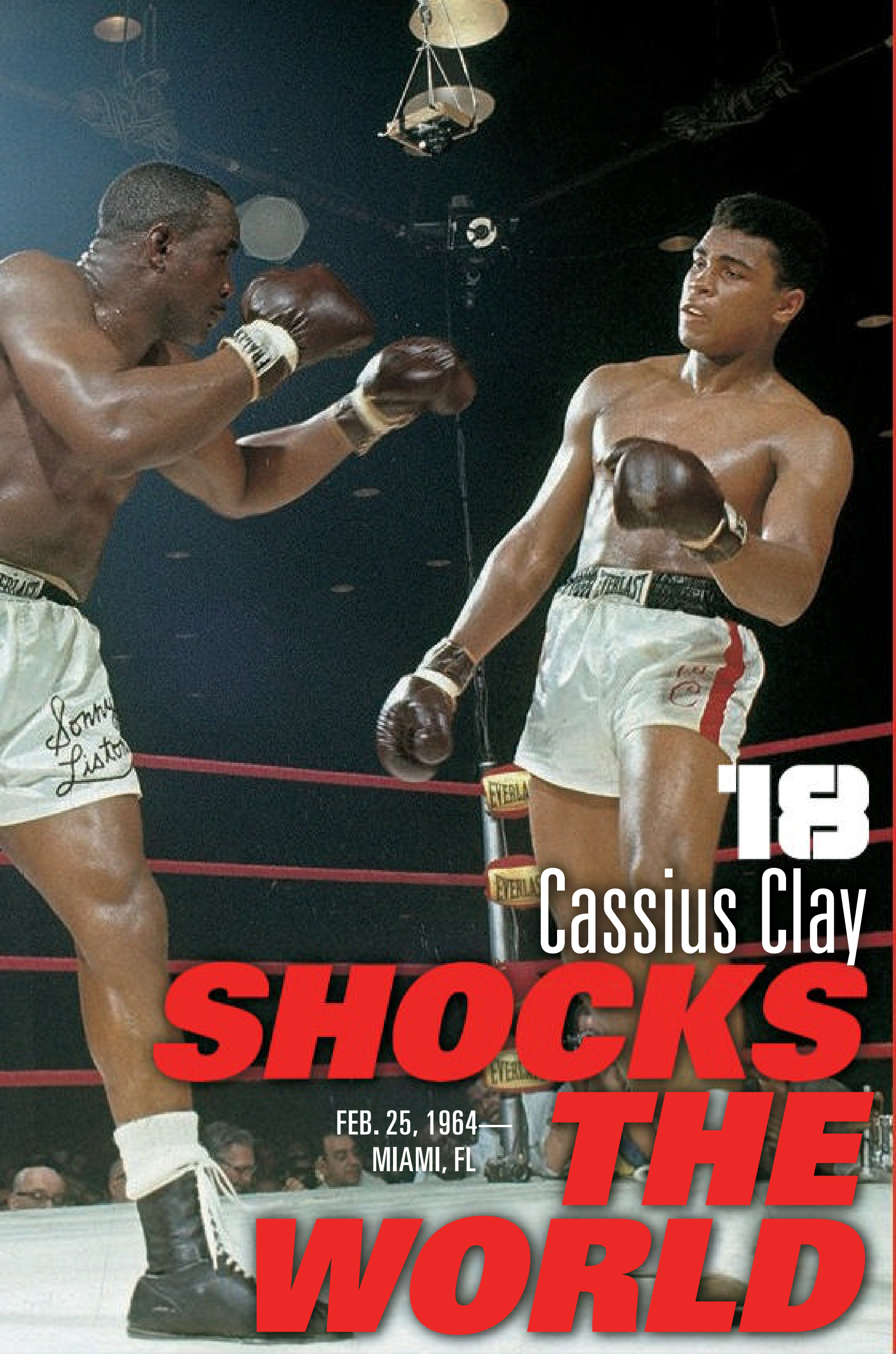
"We've got to show our disapproval of this kind of treatment or else the status quo will prevail," Russell will state, as chronicled by Mark C. Bodanza in *Ten Times a Champion*, a biography of Russell's teammate Sam Jones. "We have the same rights and privileges as anyone else and deserve to be treated accordingly. I hope we never have to go through this abuse again—but if it happens, we won't hesitate to take the same action again."

Bill Russell's death will bear an outpouring of tributes far and wide, from U.S. presidents and dignitaries to NBA commissioners and basketball legends.

"He paved the way and set an example for every Black player who came into the league after him, including me," says Michael Jordan, as reported by NBC Sports.

Eleven days after Bill Russell's passing, the NBA announces, on Aug. 11, its first-ever league-wide retirement of No. 6—Russell's jersey number. "This is a momentous honor reserved for one of the greatest champions to ever play the game," says National Basketball Players Association executive director Tamika Tremaglio. "Bill's actions on and off the court throughout the course of his life helped to shape generations of players for the better. And for that, we are forever grateful."

17



18

Cassius Clay SHOCKS THE WORLD

FEB. 25, 1964—
MIAMI, FL

Boxing fans prepare for the most mismatched title fight yet when Sonny Liston, the terrifying—and now mildly irritated—world heavyweight champ, steps into the ring to dispense with his underdog challenger, an incessantly trash-talking, swaggering 22-year-old named Cassius Clay.

Liston's most recent demolitions in the ring were a pair of first-round knockouts of former title holder Floyd Patterson. Packing boxing's most devastating punch, Liston is mean, massive and viciously efficient. Clay, who'd won a boxing gold as a teen in the '60 Olympics, is unproven in the real ring—while jabbering like a guy who clearly has it coming to him.

"Sonny Liston is nothing," Clay babbles before the fight. "The man can't talk. The man can't fight. The man needs talking lessons. The man needs boxing lessons. And since he's gonna fight me, he needs falling lessons."

A short, shut-this-kid-up-already pummeling is expected. All but three of the match's 46 ringside reporters pick the 8–1 favored Liston to win by KO. Clay disagrees—promising reporters he'll "shock the world" in just seven rounds, tops.

The shock is well underway in the early rounds as a lightning-fast, fleet-footed Clay introduces the world to a kind of electrifying elegance never before witnessed in the ring. Floating around Liston's heavy swings like a taunting Gene Kelly, the challenger connects with snappy, stinging blows and takes total charge of the fight. By the third round, an exhausted Liston is battered and bleeding. Three rounds later, Liston doesn't get up from his stool. He's done.

A crowd of 8,300 stunned spectators at Miami Beach's Convention Hall arena watch the new heavyweight champion of the world do his victory dance. Ten days later, he'll rename himself Muhammad Ali.

A decisive rematch between the two fighters the following year will send Liston to the floor at 1:44 of the first round. The barely detectable "phantom punch" delivered by Ali hovering over a crumpled Liston will inspire boxing's most iconic photograph—and 50 years of needless speculation about what just happened.

BORG AND McENROE DEMONSTRATE THEIR DIFFERENCES

JULY 5, 1980—
LONDON, ENGLAND

Storied rivals John McEnroe and Bjorn Borg will play each other just 14 times, splitting wins evenly between 1978 and 1981—a golden era in tennis as the sport accelerates in popularity. But the most memorable of the "Fire and Ice" rivalry happens in 1980 during the Wimbledon final.

Known in London tabloids as the "superbrat" and "the Incredible Sulk" for his on-the-court tantrums and tussles with officials, McEnroe—a southpaw from New York with an exceptional serve-and-volley game—is booed by fans when he steps on to the Centre Court in London. Meanwhile, his opponent, who is famous for his unusual backhand and powerful groundstrokes from the baseline, is cool and calm, and nicknamed "Ice Borg." There's a clear favorite going into this final.

For three hours and 53 minutes, Borg and McEnroe battle it out on the court, with a legendary and exhausting 22-minute fourth set tiebreak that McEnroe wins 18–16 to push his opponent into the final set. But Borg proves to be unbreakable and goes on to win (1–6, 7–5, 6–3, 6–7, 8–6), claiming his fifth consecutive Wimbledon title.

In a 2022 interview with NPR, McEnroe discusses his reputation as tennis' bad boy crescendoing during the 1980 singles final. He remembers thinking that Borg would buckle after the tiebreaker. Rather, his opponent "dug in even deeper." The loss, McEnroe says, made him hungrier. "And I think it certainly helped me those next couple of years," he adds.

In a rematch the following year at Wimbledon, McEnroe takes a four-set victory in the singles final, extinguishing Borg's five-year reign.

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MARADONA TAKES MATTERS INTO HIS OWN FEET—AND HAND

JUNE 22, 1986—MEXICO CITY, MEXICO

In the World Cup quarterfinals against England, Argentina's Diego Maradona scores soccer's most infamous goal—"The Hand of God"—and then, minutes later, follows it up by netting "The Goal of the Century."

That first goal, one that still incenses England fans today, occurs early in the second half when Maradona leaps in the air as though he's going to head the ball, but instead punches it past goalkeeper Peter Shilton. England players protest the handball to official Bin Nasser, but without a clear view of what occurred and no instant video replay technology available at the time, the goal stands.

After the game, Maradona is poetic, claiming his first goal was scored "a little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God." Heavens, no, recounts Shilton, who'll maintain in interviews decades later that Maradona cheated when the subject inevitably comes up. Maradona was quite clever, the English goalie tells Sky News, because he flicked his head right at the same time he punched the ball—theatrics that tricked the game's officials. "I don't think he expected to get away with it," says Shilton. "But he did."

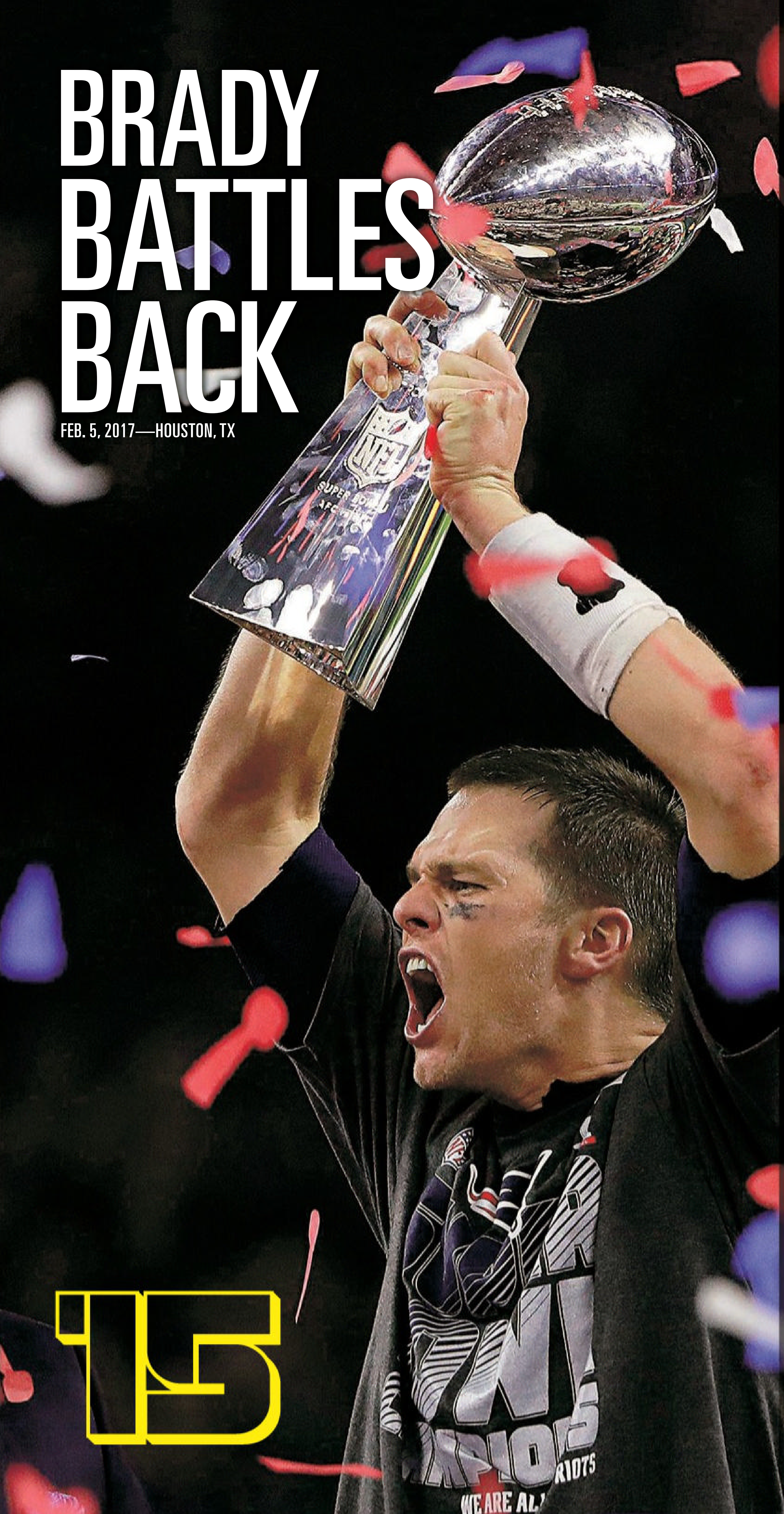
As for Maradona's follow-up goal scored four minutes later? It's an uncontested display of pure athleticism.

The soccer star dribbles past half of England's players and slots the ball in the net. Argentina wins 2–1, advancing to the 1986 World Cup with a victory over West Germany in the final match. A FIFA promotion in 2002 deems the second goal in the match to be the "Goal of the Century"—providing some added insurance for auction-worthy game souvenirs later on.

In 2022, bids for Maradona's jersey worn when he scored both goals will reach $9.3 million. The "Hand of God" ball is on deck to be auctioned next.

BRADY BATTLES BACK

FEB. 5, 2017—HOUSTON, TX



15

"28–3." No pair of numbers will make Georgia sports fans shudder like these after Feb. 5, 2017. That's what the scoreboard reads with about two minutes left in the third quarter of Super Bowl LI, with the Atlanta Falcons cruising to the franchise's first championship over the widely hated New England Patriots. What follows over the next 21 minutes of game time defies football physics, even for the current millennium's most dynastic NFL team.

The hot takes are pouring in at halftime from around the world as a 39-year-old Tom Brady quarterbacking his then-record seventh Super Bowl is already being put out to pasture for his lackluster performance up to that point. He's taking sacks, missing open receivers and even throws a pick-six—something that's never been done on the SB stage by a winning quarterback.

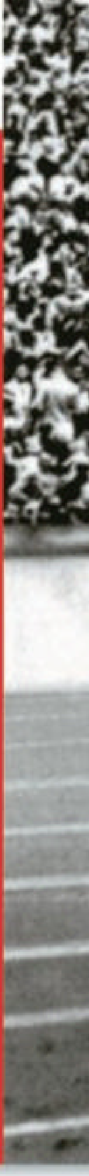
"Tom Brady's first half in Super Bowl 51 was a bust," chides *Sporting News* midway through the game, with a dubious dare. "He has just 30 minutes to lead the biggest rally ever in Super Bowl history."

On the Falcons side, starter Matt Ryan is doing everything right, putting together a passer rating of 158.3 compared to Brady's 66.8.

FiveThirtyEight gives Atlanta a 99.6 percent probability of winning it with less than 10 minutes to go. The time-crunched combo of things that need to happen for Brady and his teammates to crawl out of a 25-point hole in a little over a quarter in the NFL's biggest game is staggering: The Patriots have to keep the league's highest-scoring offense from tallying a single point over the course of four drives; they have to pull off a pair of two-point conversions; Julian Edelman has to make a drive-saving catch that will be called the best in Super Bowl history; Brady has to lead four scoring drives of at least 70 yards, including the longest game-winning drive he'll ever engineer in the playoffs.

Brady and the Patriots check all of those boxes off. They win the game 34–28 in overtime. 'Nuff said.

"It's hard to find words tonight," Ryan says in the post-game press conference. Brady, meanwhile, easily locates his own when he tells reporters: "We're all going to remember this for the rest of our lives."



14

JESSE OWENS SPOILS HITLER'S OLYMPICS

JULY—AUGUST 1936
—BERLIN, GERMANY

An argument can be made that the performance of Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics is the purest example of sports as the meritocracy that most fans wish or believe them to be. The idea that a young Black man, whose grandparents were slaves and whose own civil rights won't be formally recognized by his own country for another 30 years, can step into the epicenter of a rising tide of fascist white supremacy and come away an icon is a scenario that a screenwriter wouldn't dare invent.

Three years after Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party come to power in Germany, the Berlin Games are meant to showcase everything this burgeoning dictatorship and its "master race" stand for. Instead, a 22-year-old Ohioan (aka "The Buckeye Bullet") dominates the competition and the headlines by winning a record four gold medals in track and field events, including the 100-meter, 200-meter, long jump and 4x100-meter relay—while setting three world records in the process. Including Owens' four medals, Black athletes will account for a quarter of the 56 Olympic medals won by Team USA in 1936, and over half of the golds.

Unsurprisingly, Hitler declines to shake hands with Owens or any of the non-German athletes at medal ceremonies.

Back in the U.S., the Olympic hero is actually met with a similar reaction. "Although I wasn't invited to shake hands with Hitler, I wasn't invited to the White House to shake hands with [President Franklin Roosevelt], either," says Owens, who'll go on to work an assortment of menial jobs after the Olympics, including as a playground janitor and gas station attendant, despite his achievements and international fame. The track legend will also participate in carnivalesque-type local racing spectacles against amateur runners—and occasionally horses—for quick cash.

"After I came home from the 1936 Olympics, it became increasingly apparent that everyone was going to slap me on the back but no one was going to offer me a job," Owens will later note. "People say it was degrading for an Olympic champion to run against a horse, but what was I supposed to do? I had four gold medals, but you can't eat four gold medals."

The former track star will find more dignifying work after being enlisted by President Dwight Eisenhower as a goodwill ambassador in the mid-'50s—touring the world to promote physical exercise, tout the mid-century cause of American freedom and opportunity, and share some of his own resilient ideals as well:

"Find the good—it's all around you. Find, it, showcase it and you'll start believing it," Owens will advise, adding—"One chance is all you need."

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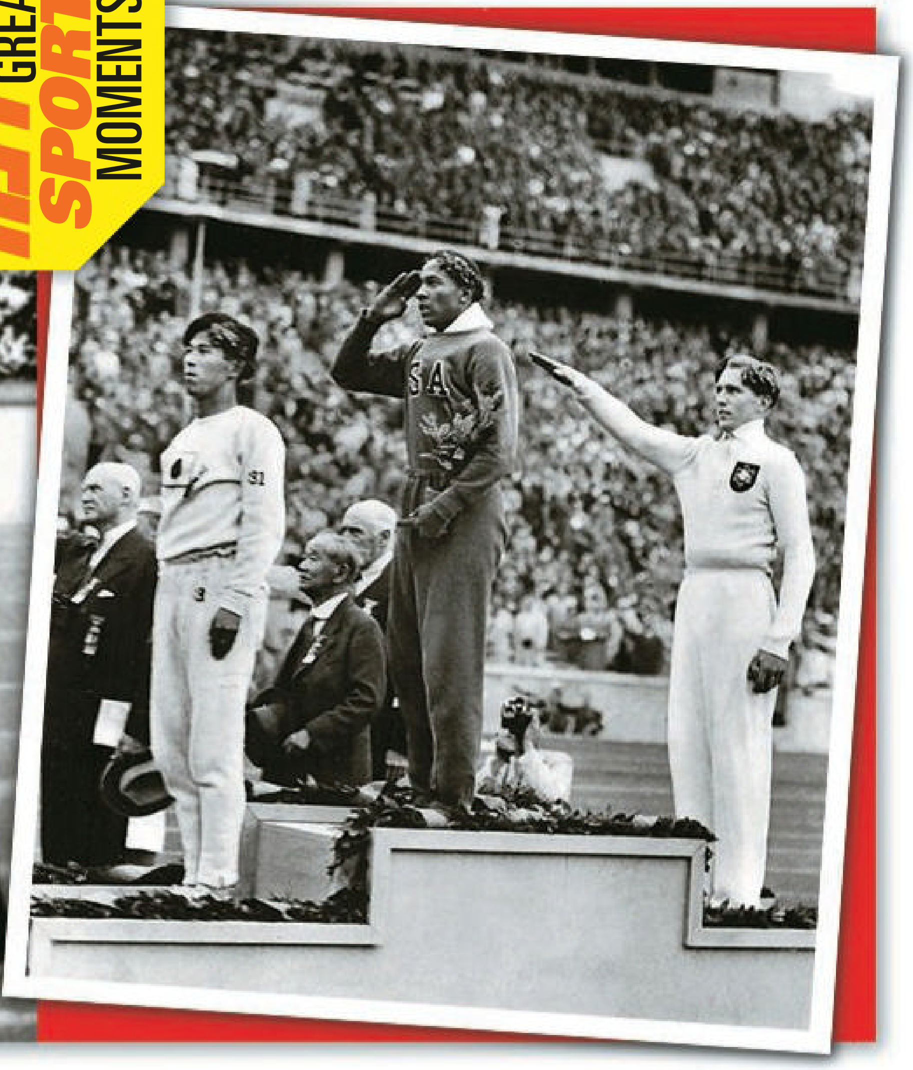
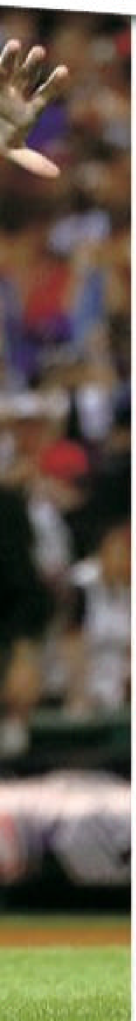
CUBS KICK THE CURSE

NOV. 2, 2016
—CLEVELAND, OH





For the first time ever, the two most hapless teams in Major League Baseball are meeting in the World Series. But hapless is relative. No sports franchise does haplessness quite like the Chicago Cubs, who haven't won it all since 1908.

That's 108 years ago. The last time the Cubs won the World Series, Roosevelt was in office (as in Theodore), the Model T was just launched and construction on the *Titanic* wouldn't begin for another five months. The team would make it back to seven more World Series after that, losing all of them. Their last big disappointment was in 1945.

The Cleveland Indians (now Guardians) haven't won a World Series since 1948. Only compared to the Cubs would this seem relatively recent. Cleveland has one other thing going for them here. They haven't been officially cursed, like Chicago.

The "Curse of the Billy Goat" was placed on the Cubs back in 1945 by William Sianis, the original owner of Chicago's famous Billy Goat Tavern. As the story goes, Sianis was incensed after being told to leave the stadium when his pet goat, Murphy (who he'd naturally brought to the game), was disturbing other folks. "Those Cubs, they ain't gonna win no more," jinxed the ex-fan. Sure enough, the Cubs would lose the World Series that year, followed by another seven fruitless decades. Despite Sianis' later attempts to lift his own hex before dying in 1970, the Cubs haven't been back—until 2016, in one of the most highly anticipated championship series starring baseball's biggest pair of perennial losers.

Four games in, it looks like the Billy Goat curse is intact. After being pounded 6–0 by Cleveland in Game 1 before briefly tying up the series and then losing the next two games on home turf at Wrigley Field, the Cubs are down 3–1. Only five teams in MLB history have ever come back from this deficit in a World Series. Fighting those odds and that old Billy Goat magic, the Cubs win a pair and force a rare deciding game in Cleveland.

During an instant classic that many call the greatest World Series Game 7 ever, the Cubs dominate the first half of the game, leading 5–1, before Cleveland storms back with a two-out, three-run rally in the bottom of the 8th to tie it up 6–6. A scoreless ninth inning leads to a 10th inning interrupted by a 17-minute rain delay—and a team meeting called by Cubs right fielder Jason Heyward, who teammates will later credit with turning things around, as reported by *Sports Illustrated*.

"We're the best team in baseball—for a reason," Heyward reminds his team. "Stick together and we're going to win this game," he assures them.

"It's the most important thing to happen to the Chicago Cubs in the past 100 years," recalls first baseman Anthony Rizzo about the rain delay. "I don't think there's any way we win the game without it."

Top of the 10th. A run-scoring RBI double by series MVP Ben Zobrist breaks the tie for the Cubs, followed by a second run to take them up by two. A bottom of the inning rally for Cleveland brings them within one run, before it's suddenly all over on an infield ground out.

After an epic game that stretches into the early hours of the following morning, the longest championship drought in American sports—108 years—has ended.

How badly did the city of Chicago want this last win? Two days later, an estimated five million W-starved Cubs fans attend a victory parade from Wrigley Field to Grant Park—ranked by *The Telegraph* as the seventh most-attended event in world history.

GRETZKY GETS PAST GORDIE

MARCH 23, 1994—
INGLEWOOD, CA

The two most seismic hockey moments west of the Mississippi—if not 1980 Lake Placid, NY (see #2)—have to do with one player.

When Wayne Gretzky steps onto the ice as a Los Angeles King on Oct. 6, 1988, after being dealt by Canada's Edmonton Oilers, shock waves reverberate way beyond Southern California. There's just something about the Great One tilting the hockey spotlight below the 49th parallel that changes the game forever in America.

Six seasons later, Gretzky's 802nd goal in the second period of an otherwise forgettable Kings loss to the Vancouver Canucks is, in its own way, even more ice shattering. The biggest goal of #99's career is the one that surpasses hockey legend Gordie Howe's scoring title—the most ironclad pre-Wayne record in sports.

Fittingly, it happens during a power play give-and-go with Gretzky's longtime ex-Oiler teammates Marty McSorley and Jari Kurri on the ice. A perfect cross-ice pass from McSorley leaves Gretzky wide open on the far side of the Vancouver net to tuck the puck past an out-of-position Canuck goalie Kirk McLean.

Mobbed by teammates, hugged by family, cheered by a packed house of new-and-improved Kings fans, which now includes Tom Hanks and friends, the Great One is handed a microphone on one more rolled-out red carpet for the four-time Stanley Cup champion who'll claim 61 hockey records. The most touching moment tonight for worldwide hockey fans: Gretzky coming face-to-face with his own childhood idol, the legendary Gordie Howe, here to congratulate his surpasser for surpassing the unsurpassable.

"A lot of times when you meet your idol you're somewhat taken aback or disappointed," the spotlight-eschewing Gretzky later tells *NHL.com*. "For me, when I met Gordie, he was bigger and better than I thought."

12

Los Angel
LA TECH 99

11

USAIN BOLT BEATS USAIN BOLT

AUG. 16 & 20, 2009—BERLIN, GERMANY

NEW WR
19.19
JAMAICA
BOLT

Usain Bolt takes to the racing blocks, striking his iconic lightning bolt pose before he goes on to prove, yet again, he's the fastest man on Earth. Bolt runs the 100-meter sprint in the 2009 IAAF World Championships in an astounding 9.58 seconds, clipping 0.11 seconds from the 9.69 record he set at the Olympic Games in Beijing a year prior and pushing the record further out of reach for his future competitors. He thuds his chest after crossing the finish line.

Bolt is catching his breath in a post-race interview with NBC Sports, and with the 200-meter still ahead of him, the Jamaican sprinter is asked if he'll be setting any more records in Berlin. "You can always expect me to go out and do my best," he replies, prophetically enough.

For Bolt's encore four days later, he breaks his own 200-meter world record, clocking in at 19.19 seconds, and improving on his previous record of 19.30 seconds at the Beijing Olympics. Suffice it to say, he did better than his best.

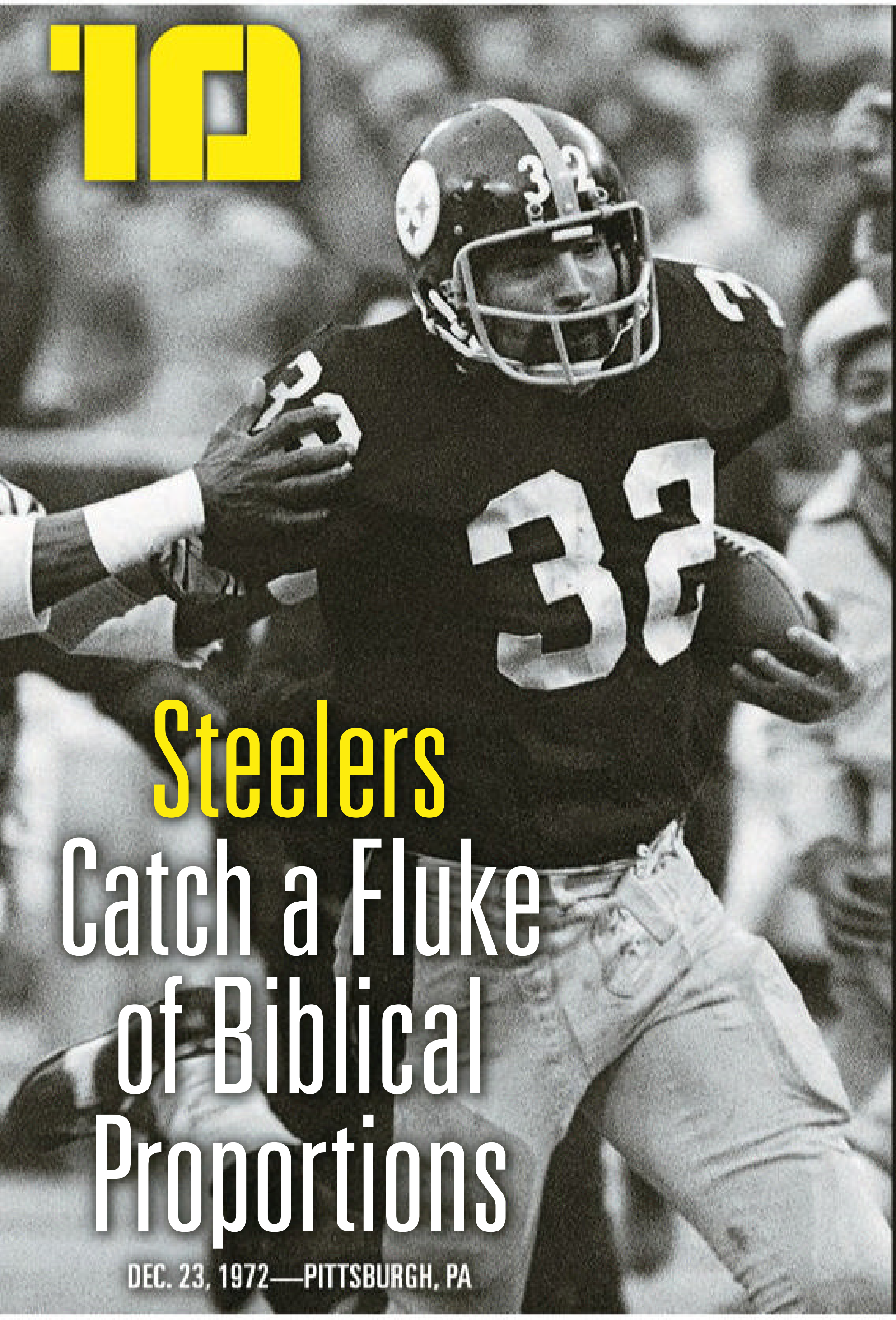
Bolt, an eight-time Olympic gold medalist, retires in 2017. He's the first sprinter in history to win gold medals in the 100-meter and 200-meter at three consecutive Games.

"Yeah, I'm very proud of being the fastest man in the world," he tells CNN Sports. "But it takes so much to do three back-to-back Olympics and win those—so for me I'm proudest of those golds."

10

Steelers Catch a Fluke of Biblical Proportions

DEC. 23, 1972—PITTSBURGH, PA



"A million to one!" and "Christmas miracle!" are some of the first giddy epithets hurled by live Pittsburgh broadcasters at what will come to be known as the "Immaculate Reception"—or "Deception," depending on who you ask.

Either way, the wildly unorchestrated touchdown in the final seconds of the AFC Divisional playoff game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Oakland Raiders helps turn the Steelers into a '70s juggernaut and rookie running back Franco Harris into the most beloved and reviled name in Western Pennsylvania and Northern California, respectively.

Ranked #1 on the "NFL 100 Greatest" list of best plays in league history, the so-called Immaculate Reception (really, it was anything but) confirms that, when timed just right by the football gods, the craziest and most dramatic fluke ever on an NFL playoff field gets biblical reference treatment.

With the Pittsburgh Steelers down 7–6 on a 4th-and-10 at their own 40-yard line with 22 seconds left in the game, scrambling Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw narrowly avoids being sacked before barely getting off a pass to running back John Fuqua. The ball will instead pinball off Raiders safety Jack Tatum (or does it only hit Fuqua instead, rendering the play dead according to early '70s NFL rules?) and into the unsuspecting hands of 22-year-old Steelers rookie Franco Harris just before it hits the turf (or does the ball touch the ground first, also rendering the play dead?). Please discuss amongst yourselves.

Harris then runs into the end zone for a 60-yard, game-winning touchdown. Endless controversy surrounding the "play" just fuels its fame.

"No matter how many times I watch the films of the 'Immaculate Reception,' play, I never know for sure what happened," '72 Raiders coach and NFL figurehead John Madden will claim in his autobiography, *Hey, Wait a Minute*.

Honorable mention: Four years later, a spectacular acrobatic snag on a 53-yard Bradshaw bomb by Steelers wide receiver Lynn Swann late in the first half of 1976's Super Bowl X victory over the Dallas Cowboys will, in the opinions of many, deserve to be called the *real* Immaculate Reception.

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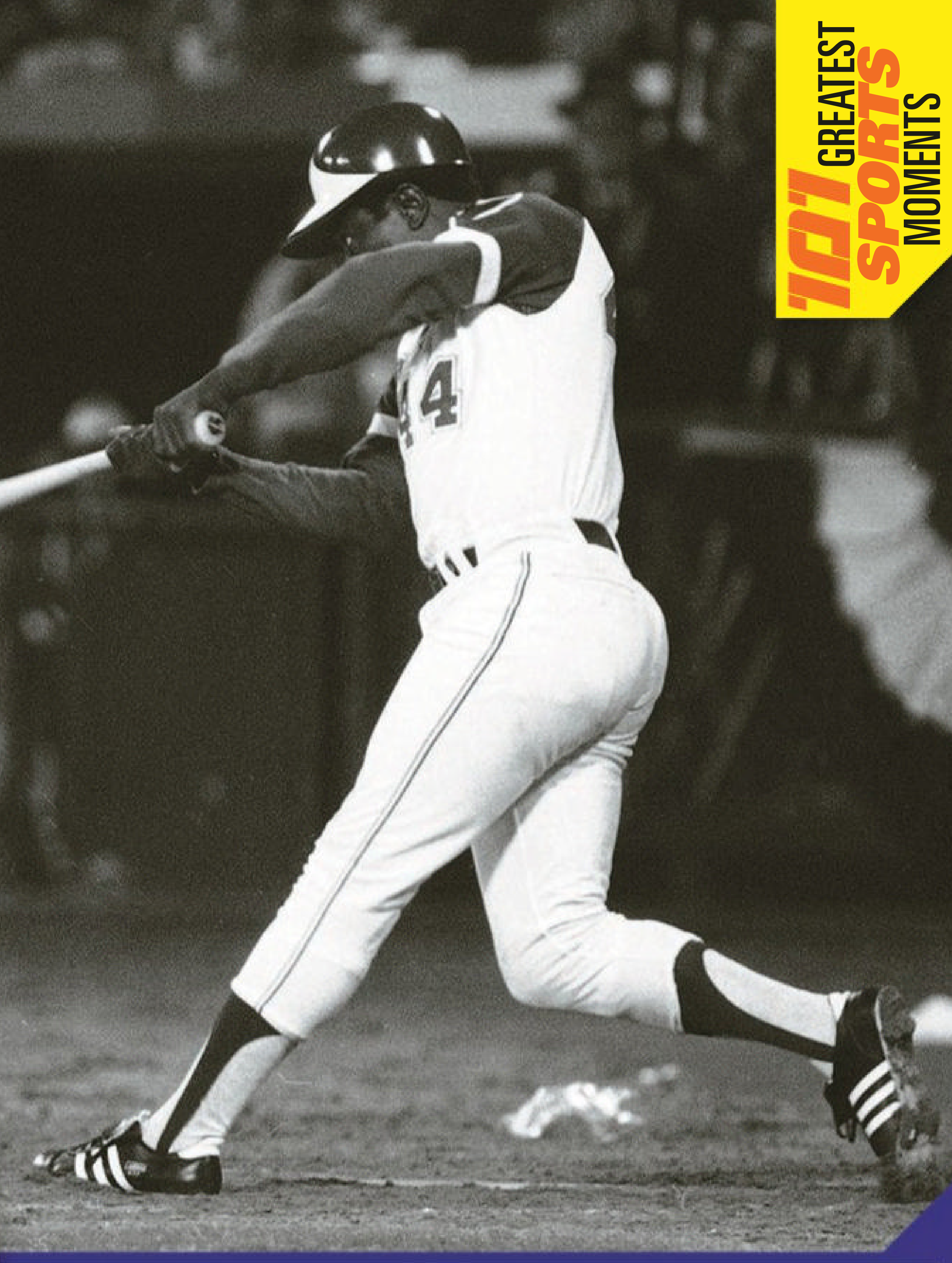

HANK AARON HITS HOMER NO. 715

ATLANTA, GA—APRIL 8, 1974

As famously low-key as his record-holding predecessor wasn't, Henry Aaron (who quietly prefers his actual name over "Hank," but you'd never know it) lets his bat do all the talking when slugging his 715th homer over the left-center field fence to overtake Major League Baseball's all-time home run title set by Babe Ruth nearly 40 years earlier.

That doesn't stop the cannons from blasting in celebration, the instant fireworks and everyone else from chiming in as the legendary Braves veteran rounds the bases before a standing sellout crowd at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium to claim one of the most hallowed records in sports.

"Outta here! It's gone! It's 715! There's a new home run champion of all time, and it's Henry Aaron!" local sportscaster Milo Hamilton brags on Hammerin' Hank's behalf. "Henry Aaron is coming around third. His teammates are at home plate. And listen to this crowd!"

"What a marvelous moment for baseball," announcer Vin Scully for the visiting L.A. Dodgers will remark—addressing the elephant in the stadium. "What a marvelous moment for Atlanta and the state of Georgia…for the country and the world. A Black man is getting a standing ovation in the Deep South for breaking a record of an all-time baseball idol."

Earlier during the off-season, while just a single home run shy of reaching the beloved Babe's record, Aaron would receive a record 930,000 pieces of mail (and a plaque from the U.S. Postal Service to mark the achievement) largely cheering him on. But there were also racially infused death threats.

While trotting out his 715th home run, Aaron will also receive telling congratulatory handshakes from Dodger opponents—and will take a couple of college students crashing the field to pat him on the back in stride. Typically gracious and kind, the future Hall of Famer will later call for Al Downing—the Dodger pitcher who'd thrown that home run ball—to make sure he was OK: "Don't keep your head down. Don't feel sorry," Aaron reassures Downing, as recollected by the former Dodger in a 2021 *New York Times* interview shortly after Aaron's passing at age 86. Downing reassures the home run king right back.

"Mr. Aaron, I don't have my head down. It's a pleasure to play in the big leagues against you."

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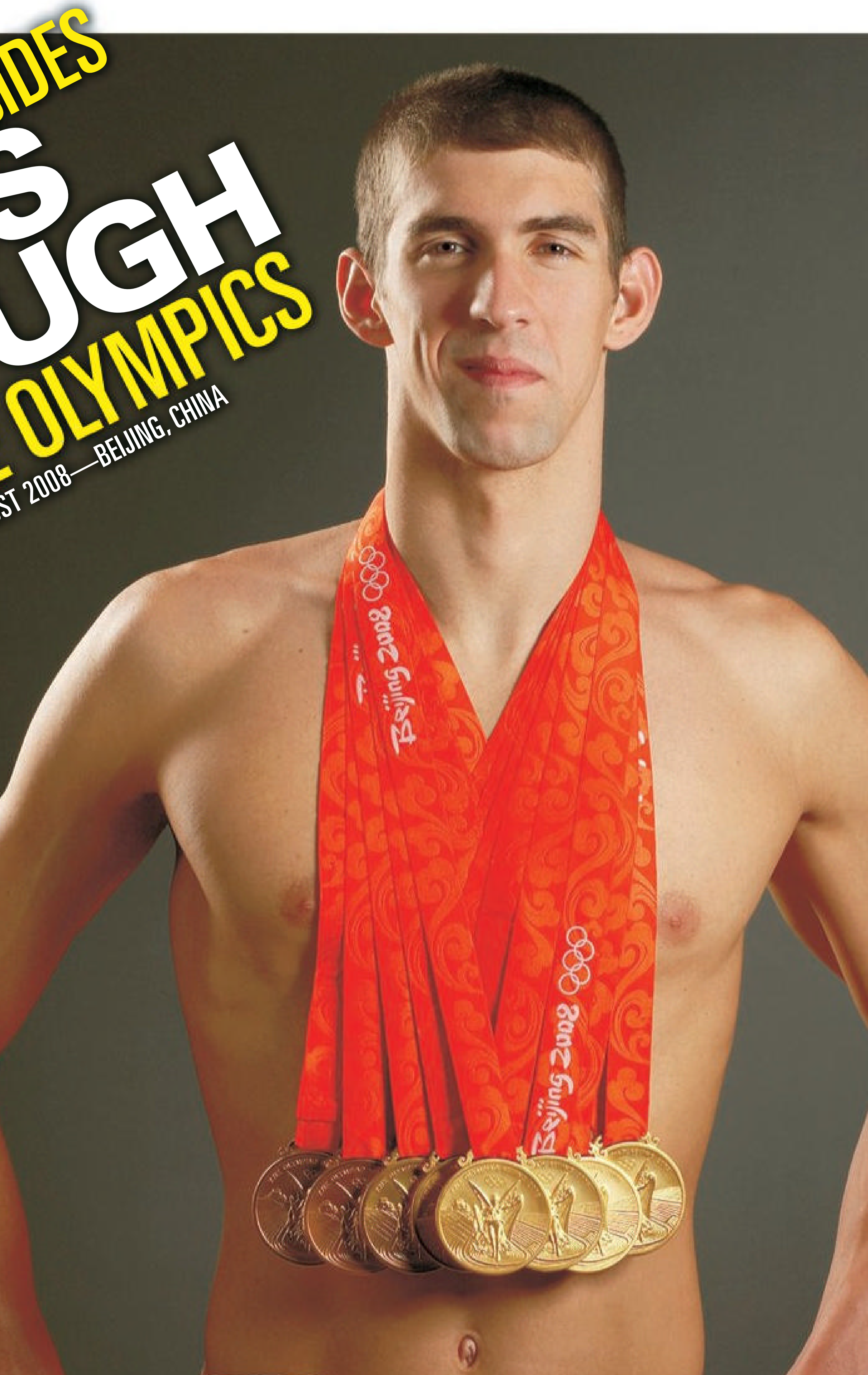
MICHAEL PHELPS DECIDES EIGHT IS ENOUGH—FOR ONE OLYMPICS

AUGUST 2008—BEIJING, CHINA



Fourteen athletes have won at least eight Olympic gold medals in a career. Only one of them has won that many in a single edition of the Games.

"I wish him all the very best," says Australian swimming legend Ian Thorpe when asked about 23-year-old Michael Phelps' chances at winning all eight events he'll be competing in at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. "I don't think he'll do it, but I'd love to see it."

That's all Phelps needs to hear. As with other elite athletes (e.g., Michael Jordan), he feeds on the doubts of others, latching onto any bit of external challenge he can find to amp his just-watch-me response.

In his eight individual races and relays, Phelps tops the podium in each of them, cranking this intensity over seven days and 14 collective minutes of peerless swimming. His Aquaman moment of the bunch: turning out a "blind" 200-meter butterfly world record—achieved with malfunctioning goggles full of water.

Phelps' incredible eight-for-eight feat comes 36 years after Mark Spitz takes seven golds in Munich, out-notching the most unbreakable-looking Olympic record. While Spitz retires at this point, Phelps keeps going, tallying 23 golds, three silvers and two bronze medals over five Summer Games by the time he retires in 2016—the most Olympic medals ever won by a single athlete, and 10 more than the runner-up.

Honorable mention: teammate Jason Lezak's final leg in the 4x100 freestyle relay. Trailing the French team, the veteran swimmer anchoring the event pulls off what's been called the most thrilling, come-from-behind leg of jet-packed speed that even he doesn't understand—clocking a fastest-ever 46 seconds to preserve Phelps perfect gold run.

"I don't know how I was able to take it back that fast, because I've never been able to come anywhere near that for the last 50," Lezak tells ESPN. "But I never lost hope."

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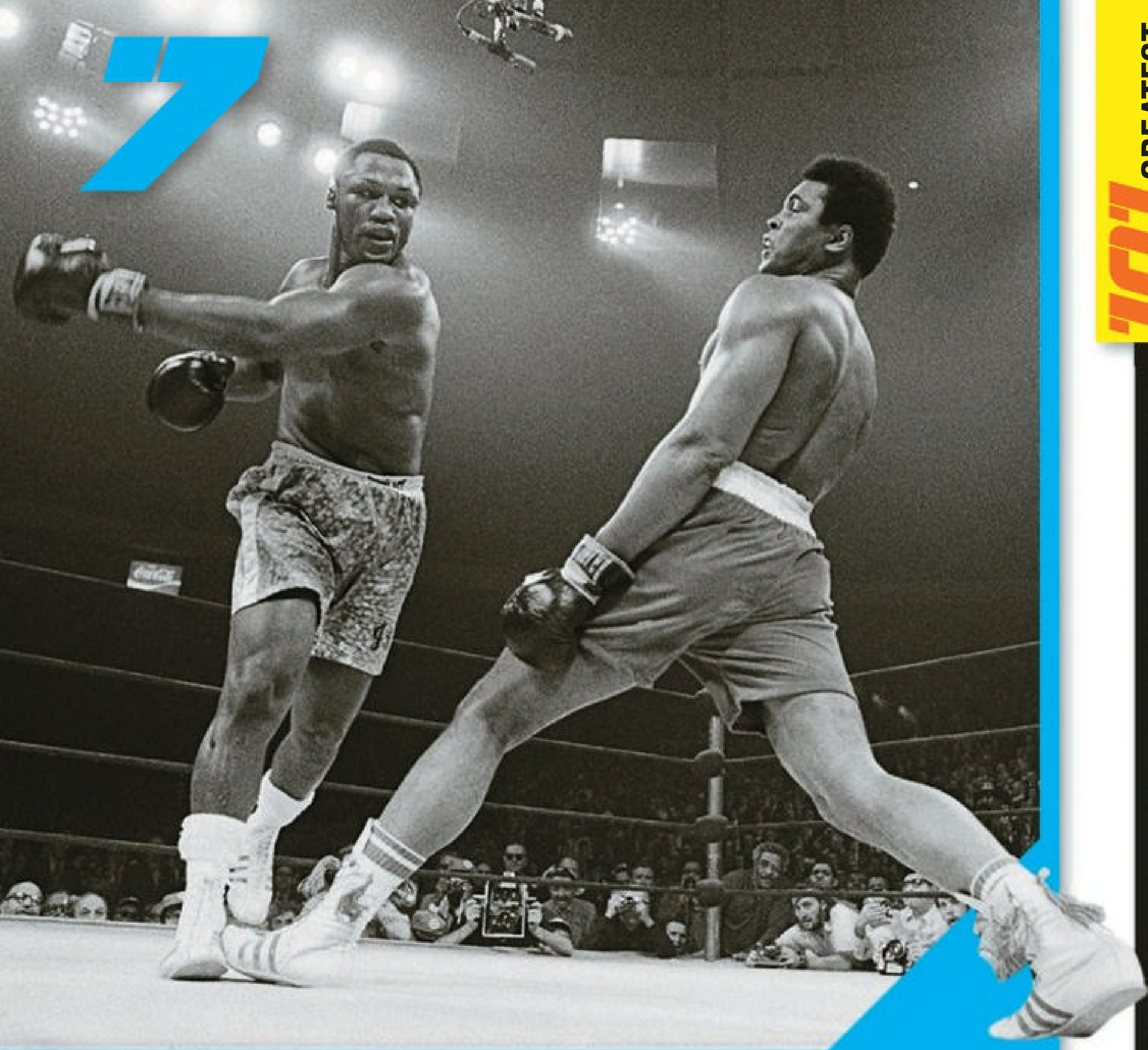


FRAZIER DELIVERS PUNCH OF THE CENTURY

MARCH 8, 1971—NEW YORK, NY

Originally billed simply as "The Fight," the first of three epic meetings between boxing Hall of Famers Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier earns its grander nickname once the final bell rings. It seems impossible that this heavyweight championship bout at Madison Square Garden will be able to live up to all the hype surrounding it—featuring two undefeated fighters who each have legitimate claims to the belts, with roughly 60 matches between their résumés, 15 rounds scheduled at the most famous venue in the world and weeks of relentless promotion. Somehow the aptly named "Fight of the Century" exceeds stratospheric expectations.

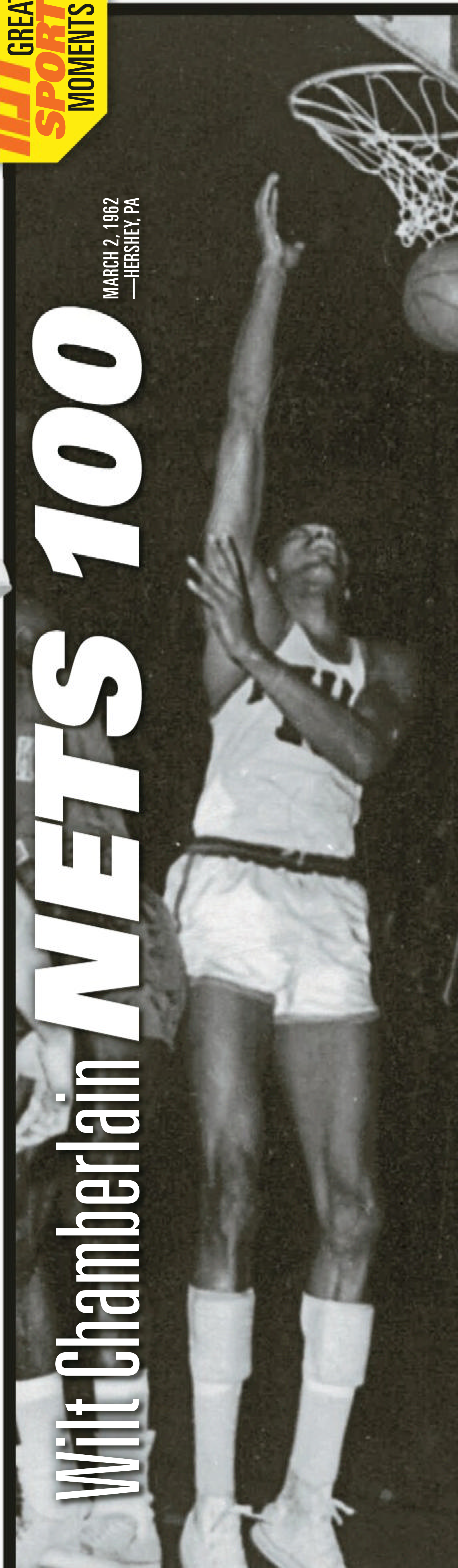
The match comes after a decision made by the world's boxing authorities to strip Ali of his heavyweight titles in 1967 after he refuses to fight in the Vietnam War despite being drafted. Held from the ring for three years, Ali becomes a pariah to many Americans—and a hero to many others—due to his open stances against the war. Those who support America's involvement in the conflict firmly back Frazier, who'll later call his opponent a "draft dodger" and someone who *doesn't love America.*

It's one of the first major instances of marquee pro athletes representing proxies for a burgeoning culture war that will explode in decades to come.

But back to the actual fight—which is a masterpiece.

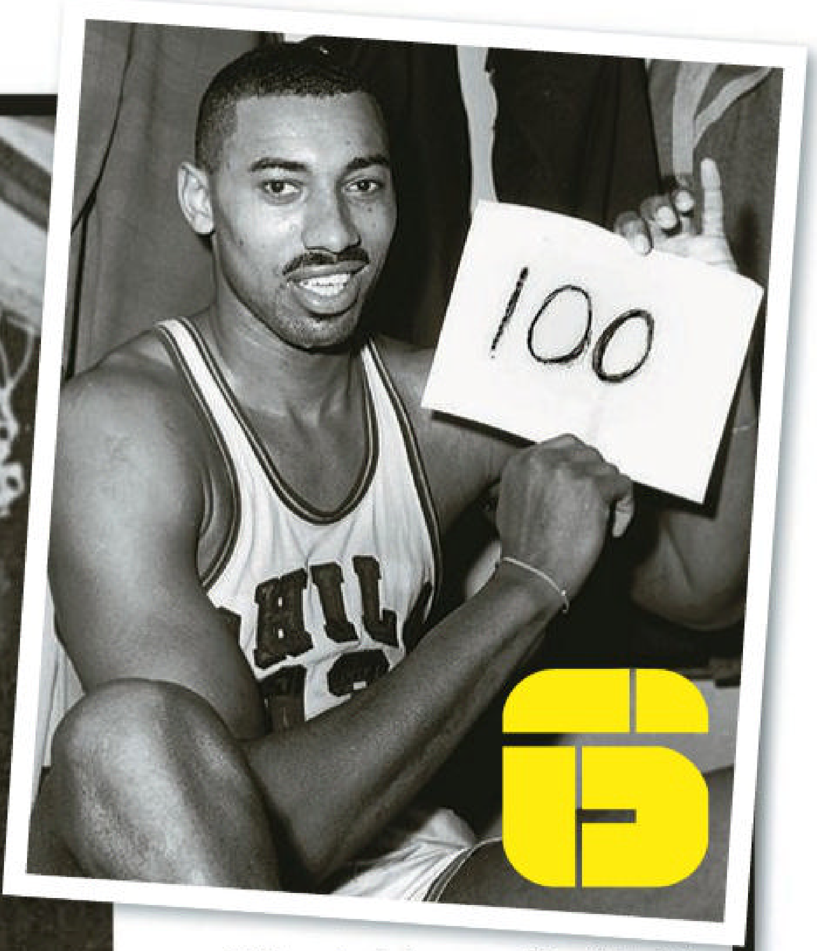
After weeks of heated talk, the two huge boxers and personalities, each with a ton to prove, get down to business—trading shots for 45 unrelenting minutes over 15 rounds. Visibly out-conditioned by Frazier in the later rounds, Ali is knocked down with a sledgehammer left hook in the 15th. It's only the third time he's ever hit the canvas—and the first loss of Ali's professional boxing career when the judges make their unanimous decision, naming Joe Frazier the World Heavyweight Champion.

"I always bring out the best in men I fight," later says Ali, who'll exact his revenge in the next two rematches—at MSG in 1974 and the "Thrilla in Manila" a year later. "But Joe Frazier, I'll tell the world right now, brings out the best in me."



Wilt Chamberlain NETS 100

MARCH 2, 1962
—HERSHEY, PA



Wilt Chamberlain pours 78 points into the basket in a triple-overtime game against the Los Angeles Lakers in December 1961 and sets the NBA record for the most points scored in a single game. A few months later, the 7"1' center known as “The Big Dipper” absolutely shatters that record when he goes on a 100-point scoring rampage against the New York Knicks, leading his Philadelphia Warriors to a 169–147 victory.

This time around, he sets the scoring record in just 48 minutes, with no overtime adding to the clock. New York’s starting center is out with the “flu”—though a teammate will later dish it was a hangover that sidelined him. The bench can’t shut down Chamberlain, who scores 23 points in the first quarter, 41 by halftime and 28 in the third quarter. By the fourth quarter, fans are chanting “Give it to Wilt! Give it to Wilt!” The Warriors squad complies, setting aside their own personal stats as Chamberlain is en route to the league’s triple-digit scoring record. In the final minute of the game, Joe Ruklick dishes a pass to Chamberlain, who drives toward the basket and scores.

Chamberlain’s 100-point game, to this day, holds allure because it wasn’t televised and there’s no film of it. In fact, only 4,000 or so fans witnessed the game. But there is audio of that final quarter and that final basket.

“He made it. A Dipper dunk!” Warriors radio broadcaster Bill Campbell booms, while describing a frenzied scene of fans running onto the floor. “One hundred points for Wilt Chamberlain!”

Chamberlain’s record stands to this day and likely many, many more. The Lakers’ Kobe Bryant will come closest when he drops 81 points against the Toronto Raptors in 2006.

NADIA COMĂNECI PERFORMS PERFECTION

JULY 18, 1976—MONTREAL, CANADA

Nothing is more elusive in sports than a perfect performance—of any sort. While America is in the wake of celebrating its bicentennial and Canada is showing itself off to the world at the ’76 Montreal Olympics, the spotlight is stolen by 14-year-old Nadia Comăneci from Romania. During the first day of competition, after a stunning performance on the uneven bars, she puts up the first-ever 10.0 by a gymnast.

The posted number will read “1.00” because the Olympic scoreboard maker hasn’t programmed “10” into the display—as nobody involved in world gymnastics thought such a score would ever happen. But this lithe girl with a ribbon in her hair doesn’t just earn the first single perfect score at the 1976 Games. She goes on to score seven of them, four on the uneven bars, which draw much of the attention, and another three on the balance beam—the latter even “more representative of her unbelievable skill,” reports *Sports Illustrated* at the time. “Her hands speak there as much as her body. Her pace magnifies her balance. Her command and distance hush the crowd.”

“I thought it was pretty good,” Comăneci says, matter-of-factly, about her historic performance on the uneven bars. “But athletes don’t think about history when making history. They think about what they’re doing, and that’s how it gets done.”

By the time the Montreal Games wrap, Comăneci has won five medals, three of them gold, becoming the youngest all-around gymnastics champion in Olympics history. It will eventually become an unbreakable record after the age-eligibility requirement is later raised to age 16. Other perfect scores will happen, including one by Soviet gymnast Nellie Kim in the same Olympics for the vault, and two more by Comăneci at the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow, where she’ll win two more golds. But the 14-year-old gymnast’s flawless performance in Montreal remains the yardstick by which they’ll all be measured.

LEICESTER CITY LICKS 5000-1 ODDS

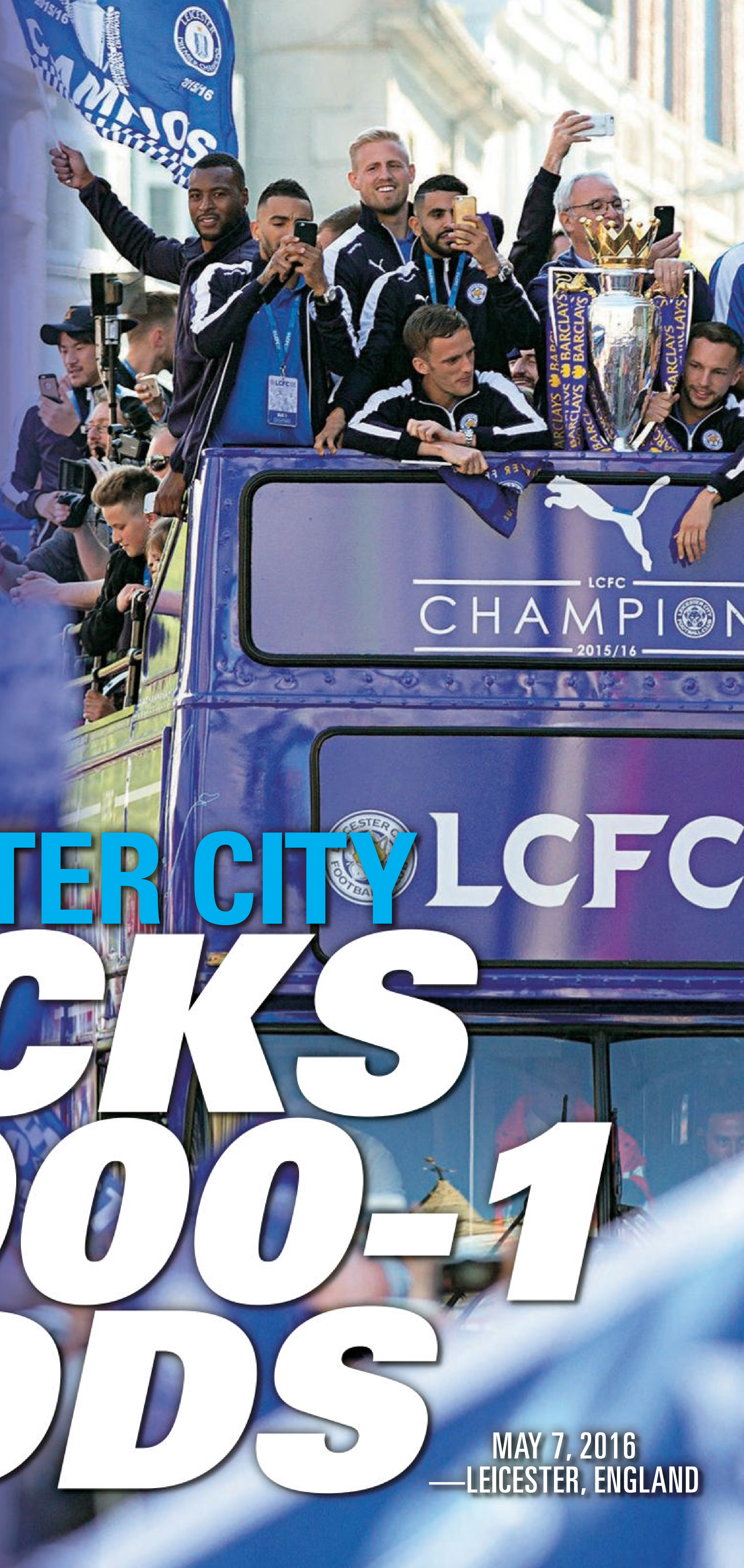
MAY 7, 2016
—LEICESTER, ENGLAND

A great underdog story is difficult not to like—unless it's your team that's favored, of course—and Leicester City's odds-shattering title run in 2015–16 makes *Rocky* look tame. After 132 years in English soccer, the Foxes will finish atop the Premier League, besting teams with bloated budgets seven times the bill they carry, according to an ESPN report.

Bookmakers give Leicester City 5000–1 odds to hoist the trophy, netting the loyal few who bet on them a life-changing payday once the fateful day they're crowned champions comes around. The fact that the team narrowly escapes relegation from the Premier League just a season earlier, and had changed managers in the off-season, only makes the feat more stunning.

Despite the theatrics of the final result, the Foxes are simply the model of consistent soccer during their dream season. That dependability is personified by striker Jamie Vardy, who sets a new Premier League record by scoring in 11 consecutive matches. They'll lose just three matches out of 38, deploying a 4-4-2 formation described by some as "prehistoric"—but it proves impenetrable.

"This is the greatest day in the history of this city," Leicester East's longtime Member of Parliament, Keith Vaz, says of the championship.



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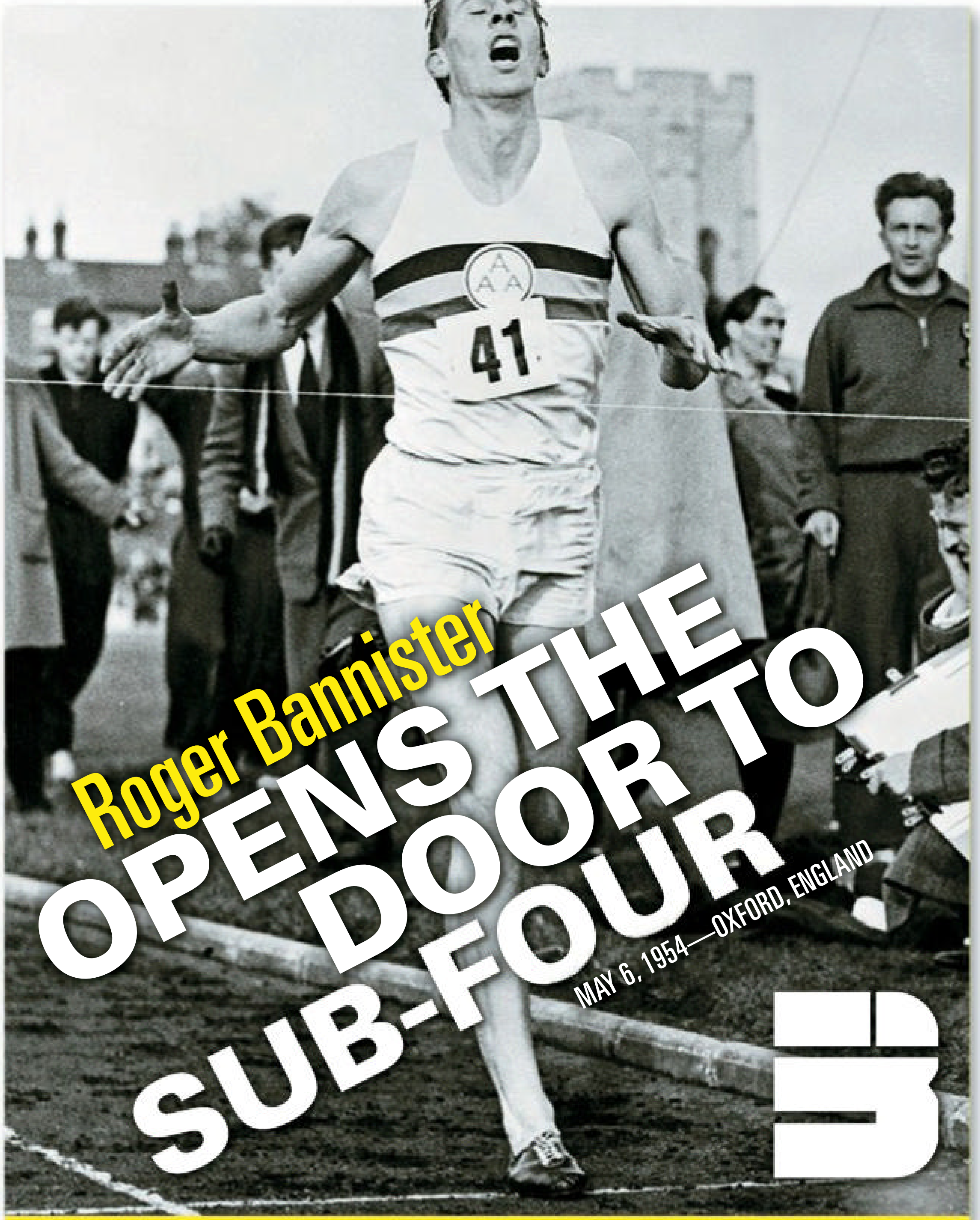

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Roger Bannister

OPENS THE DOOR TO SUB-FOUR

MAY 6, 1954—OXFORD, ENGLAND

Remarkable seasons and improbable championships happen often enough in team sports that it can be easy to archive them when the next big one comes along. But when an amateur athlete accomplishes something that no other human being in recorded history has done on the field, or was ever expected to, this deserves top-of-the-heap status.

Sir Roger Bannister (before he earns that honorific) is a young med student at Oxford who likes to push himself on the track when he isn't busy studying. Proving himself to be no average runner, he competes for England at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics—where he'll finish fourth in the men's 1,500-meter and miss the podium by about a half-second, while setting an event record for his nation in the process. What he views as a failure at the Games propels Bannister to his ultimate goal: breaking the four-minute mile.

Long believed impossible—running a mile in that pace requires maintaining a speed of 15 miles per hour for the distance—Bannister will cross that Rubicon after over a year of painstaking trials that sees him inch closer and closer to the mark.

On May 6, 1954, the 25-year-old finishes a blistering mile at three minutes, 59.4 seconds, during an Oxford track meet in chilly, wet conditions with about 3,000 people watching in awe.

What also makes Bannister's achievement so remarkable is how dramatic its effect on other athletes becomes almost immediately. Despite the sub-four-minute mile being running's *sound barrier* for untallied generations, Bannister's record is promptly broken by his arch-running rival, Australia's John Landy, who clocks a 3:58 a mere 46 days later. More runners will crush four minutes within the following year. Bannister's performance on the track that day has been studied as a model for approaching mental barriers in everything from business to tech innovation.

The knighted runner goes on to make his living as a neurologist and researcher until he dies at the age of 88 in 2018. Bannister maintains he's prouder of his career in medicine than anything—one more reason to give the greatest extracurricular running feat its eternal due.

VERCHOTA
27
MCCLANAHAN
24
USA
NORTHLAND

Team USA PULLS OFF THE MIRACULOUS

FEB. 22, 1980
—LAKE PLACID, NY

The contrast between the U.S. Olympic Men's Ice Hockey Team's fledgling collegians and the USSR's "Big Red Machine"—the best, poorly disguised professional hockey team in the world—is impossible to overstate in a crucial medal round game at the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics that will be called hockey's greatest upset ever when it's done.

The Americans are the youngest team in the tournament. Average age: 21. Stacked with Boston U and rival University of Minnesota amateurs—including captain Mike Eruzione, and future NHLers Neal Broten, Mark Pavelich and goalie Jim Craig—they've all been handpicked by U-Minn coach Herb Brooks, who begins his selection process with a 300-question psychological test to gauge how his players will handle extreme stress.

"My recruiting key—I looked for people first, athletes second," says Brooks, who'll push to greatness his 20 chosen players, assembled just a few months before the Olympics, with concise nuggets like this: "Be better than you are."

The long-considered unbeatable Soviet "amateurs" are a dedicated unit of full-time athletes (ostensibly serving in the military or industrial services) during an era when professional players aren't allowed to participate in the Olympics. The squad of elites—including world-famous goalie Vladislav Tretiak and fellow future Hockey Hall of Famers Valeri Kharlamov, Sergei Makarov, and Viacheslav Fetisov—are in Lake Placid to collect their fifth consecutive gold medal dating back to 1964. Their cumulative score against the U.S. since then: 28–7. They haven't lost a single Olympic game since 1968.

Coinciding with the latest Cold War spike, the critical round robin game is as politically fueled as it gets. Less than two weeks prior, U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance has publicly condemned Moscow's approaching Summer Games at an International Olympic Committee meeting in response to the recent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. President Carter will announce a U.S. boycott a month later.

Amidst this backdrop is an unexpected thriller of a hockey game—with both teams stepping onto the ice unbeaten in the tournament, including a 7–3 U.S. upset over the silver medal favorite Czechoslovakia. The Americans have to win this game for a shot at the gold. Unofficial Vegas odds of that happening are said to be floating around 1000–1.

As expected, the Soviets dominate and hold the lead through most of the first period, before a buzzer-beater rebound goal by Mark Johnson with one second on the clock ties it up 2–2—leading Soviet coach Viktor Tikhonov to angrily replace Tretiak with his backup goalie Vladimir Myshkin. It's a move that the tight-lipped coach will later call the "biggest mistake" of his career.

Pouring it on in the second period, the Soviets score again and take the lead for a third time. Boxed out during the first half of the final period, the Americans manage just two shots on net before a rare Soviet penalty leads to a Johnson power play goal on Myshkin to tie the game up yet again. Just over a minute later, captain Eruzione sends a screened shot past Myshkin to put USA up 4–3 in their first lead of the game—with exactly 10 minutes left.

During the longest 10 minutes ever for American hockey fans, an offensive onslaught by the Soviets is countered with the help of coach Brooks' refrain to his disciplined young team—"Just play your game"—who push their own offense back at their ferocious opponents entering panic mode for the first time. Clearing the zone on a last-minute scramble, Team USA skates out the final seconds to a deafening and electrified arena-wide countdown.

"Do you believe in miracles?" says ABC's Al Michaels, amidst a frenzy of leaping players and fans. "YES!!!"

Only "Miracle on Ice"—tapped by the International Ice Hockey Federation as the best story of the past 100 years—could hog the spotlight over Team USA's critical final game against Finland two days later. Trailing 2–1 in the final period, USA scores three straight goals to come from behind and clinch the gold medal. The Soviets will settle for silver.

JACKIE ROBINSON COMES HOME

APRIL 15, 1947—BROOKLYN, NY

Baseball's most historic play looks about as routine as it gets. Leading off at the plate for the visiting Boston Braves on Opening Day at Ebbets Field, Dick Culler knocks an easy grounder to Brooklyn Dodgers' third baseman John "Spider" Jorgensen, who fields and throws to first. As the ball smacks into the glove of the home team's 28-year-old rookie first baseman, 26,623 Dodger fans roar like a far greater inauguration has just happened than the start of a brand-new baseball season.

Jackie Robinson tosses the ball back to the mound from first, and the game goes on like never before.

"Not a one," Robinson will shrug to an Associated Press reporter during the game when asked if he has any butterflies. "I wish I could say I did, because then maybe I'd have an alibi if I don't do so good."

Robinson, the first Black player in modern Major League Baseball history, does a world of good both on and off the field during his barrier-breaking, 10-year career with the Dodgers. By the end of season 1, he'll lead the league in stolen bases, bat .297 with 125 runs and win the league's inaugural Rookie of the Year Award—which will come to be named after him.

He'll go on to win a batting title, more stolen base records, fielding records, and lead the Dodgers to six World Series and a championship. He'll be named to six National League All-Star Teams, steal home 19 times, and promptly be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. But he'll do far more than that.

"I didn't know baseball from ping pong, but the point was that he had broken in," Archbishop Desmond Tutu will say about the most courageous pioneer in modern American sports, who'll face all the racist-fueled harassment and ostracism from opposing fans, players and even teammates he's warned about, while paving the way for others. "I grew inches that day," adds the Archbishop. "I puffed out my chest."

"He was a sit-inner before sit-ins, a freedom rider before freedom rides," Martin Luther King Jr. will say.

"He meant everything to a Black ball player," says Elston Howard, the first Black member of the New York Yankees. "I don't think the young players would go through what he did. He did it for all of us—for Willie Mays, Henry Aaron, Maury Wills, myself."

"To most Black people, Jackie was a man, not a ballplayer," Celtics legend Bill Russell will say. "He was someone that young Black athletes could look up to."

"He was the greatest competitor I have ever seen," said teammate Duke Snider.

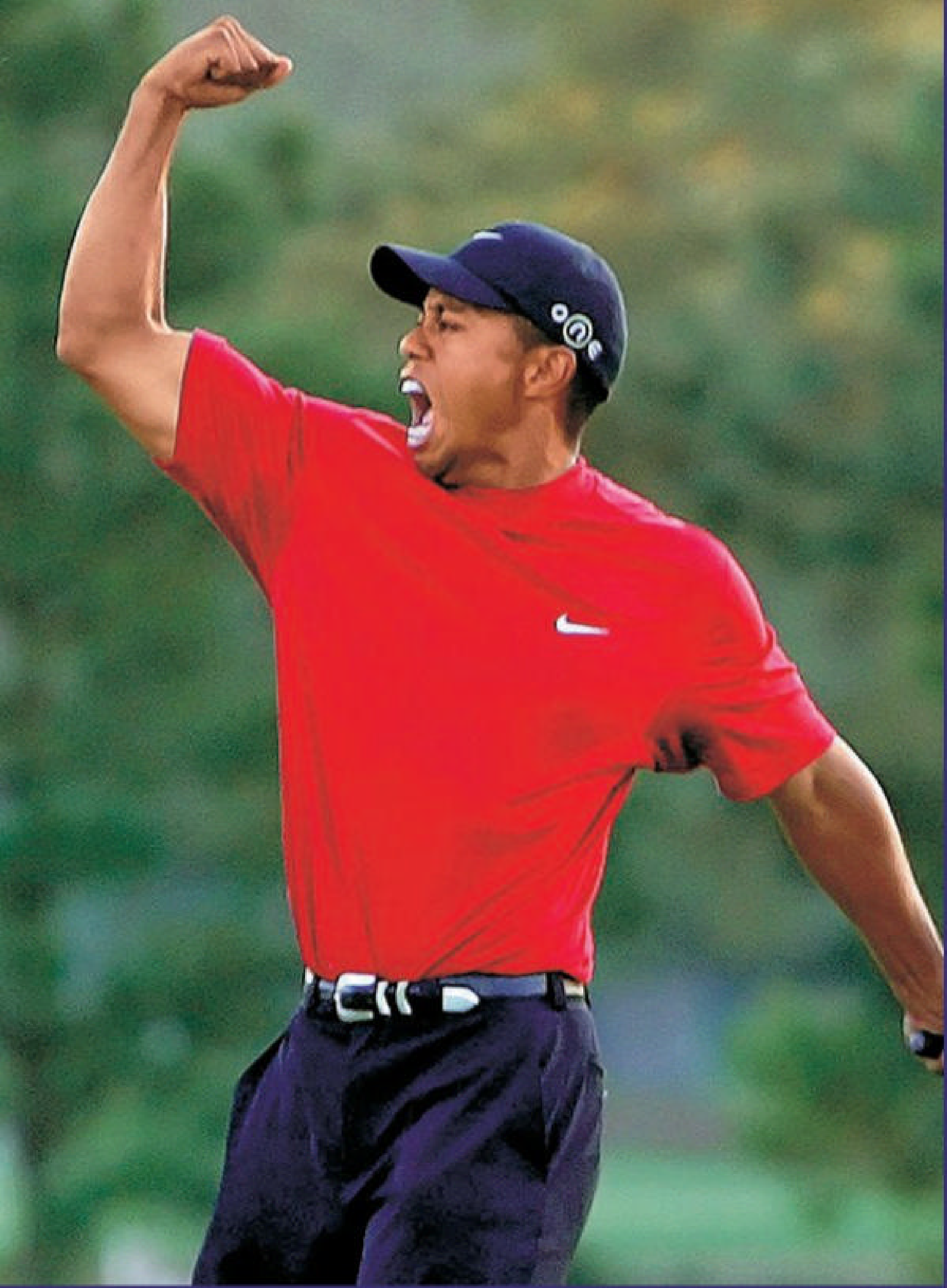
"He was out!" insists Yankees catcher Yogi Berra, about the most famous play of Robinson's career—successfully stealing home at age 36 on a Whitey Ford pitch during Game 1 of the 1955 World Series, the year the Brooklyn Dodgers would take their one and only championship.

"I saw it perfectly," counters plate umpire Bill Summers. "Yogi put the ball at the back of the plate and Robinson slid across the plate into the glove. I'm satisfied I made the right call."

But back to the biggest call of the era: April 10, 1947—when seminal Dodger president Branch Rickey promotes Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers from the minor league Montreal Royals with the signing of a National League contract. Stepping onto the field five days later, Robinson will end an era of tacit understanding among MLB club owners that no Black athlete will ever play on one of their teams. Robinson will call this the Rickey Experiment, named after a man he'll call "the greatest human being I have ever known."

"The most important results of it are that it produced understanding among whites, and it gave Black people the idea that if I could do it, they could do it, too," says Robinson. "That Blackness wasn't subservient to anything."

In 1997, half a century after the Rickey Experiment, Robinson will posthumously become the first professional athlete to have his jersey number retired across an entire professional sport. The one annual exception to that rule: on April 15, Jackie Robinson Day, when every MLB team wears No. 42 in honor of the man.



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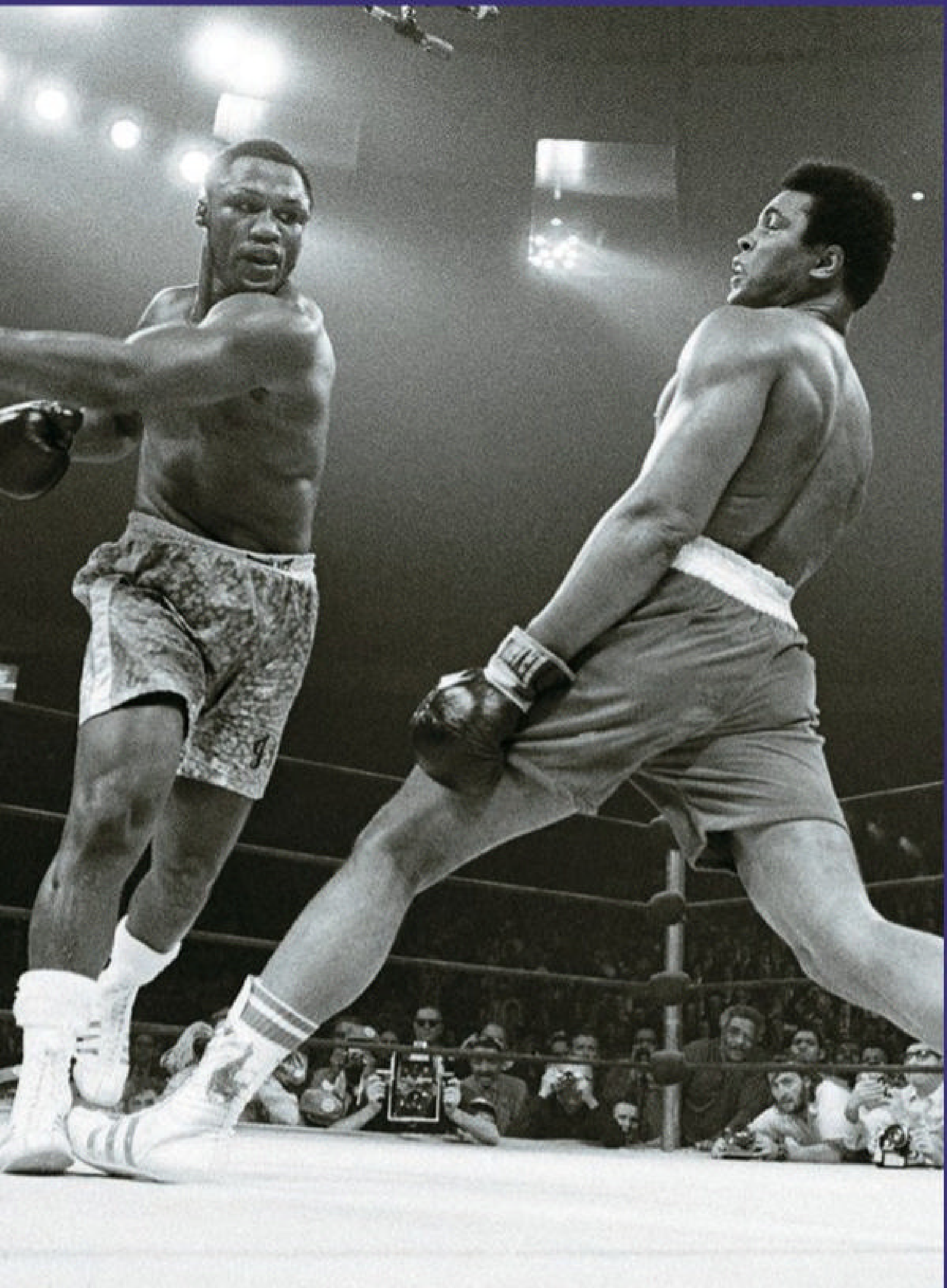

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